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Our Family of Farm Products

by Kyell Gold



Illustrated by Jonas

"Come on, Jared." I pressed up against him. "It won't take long."

He gave up his clearly ineffective tactic of ignoring me and reached back to shove me away. "I don't feel like it. Do yourself."

I rolled onto my back, hurt. He'd occasionally refused me, but never pushed me away. "Jared," I whined. I couldn't stop myself. Fifteen years old and still whining like a baby.

"Clay," he whined back mockingly, predictably, from the lofty height of his two years' superiority.

I shut up then, because I couldn't think of anything else to say. He was lying on his side facing away from me, and he didn't object when I gathered his bushy tail into my arms and pillowed it under my head. I was a little mad at him, but more bewildered. I loved Jared like a brother—maybe not like you love *your* brother, but he was *my* brother, so however I loved him was brotherly to me.

Look, I been reading the net since I was four. I know brothers don't usually do what we did. But he didn't force me and I didn't force him. We were just lonely. Dad didn't take us to town, and we didn't see the neighbors that often. They were foxes anyway, not raccoons, not that that would matter that much, but they didn't have any kids our age, just a little ten-year-old vixen cub, and I know *that'd* be wrong. So it was just me and my brother, looking out for each other.

And because we were brothers, I waited until he was asleep and then did myself, as he'd told me to, right into the fluffy mass of his ringed tail.



He didn't mention the tail to me the next morning. Maybe he felt bad about the night before, or maybe he thought he'd done it himself; when I woke, his tail was curled around his front. Or maybe he really didn't notice. Jared was like that sometimes, a trait he inherited from our father. I mean, really, what widower living alone on a farm with two adolescent sons would let them keep sleeping in the same bed for fifteen years? And not suspect anything? Meet the good Mr.

Delacourt, honorable raccoon farmer and my dear beloved father.

He was a good farmer, having kept the place going for ten years after our mother died of whitemouth. He believed in old-fashioned farming, but kept up with the latest advances in robot technology, and was smart enough to see that the up-front expense of buying robots would pay off in the long run. He had a gift for planting and raising crops, and though he wasn't good with our small dairy herd, he knew enough to leave that to my brother and me, who were.

We saw him at meals, and occasionally over the course of the evenings, but during the days he was out with the tiller and planter robots, or overseeing the harvest-bots, or sometimes out at market negotiating sales, though often the buyers would come to our farm. He was a canny businessman and had succeeded in building a strong reputation, and he never had trouble selling his crops.

And yet, for all that, he'd never suspected what his sons did in bed (or occasionally in the dairy barn or pasture), though he slept right in the next room. We used to stay up tensely, waiting for his snores to start; nowadays we barely waited until the door was closed. Usually.

We each had separate chores, so we didn't see each other during the day anymore. Jared had taken to overseeing the milking-bot himself, cleaning the barn as he did so. I didn't mind; I hated cleaning, even with the automatic shovels. I was happy to do the walkabouts, checking the herds in the pastures and fixing any fence breaks reported by the little sentry-bots. Today, one of the sentry-bots itself was broken, and it took me until mid-afternoon to fix it. I'd been learning robot repair ever since our cook broke down and Dad took over—three days of celery pancakes, marshmallow omelettes, and hot chocolate with blueberries was plenty of incentive for me. Jared, like I mighta mentioned, didn't always notice stuff so much, and he wasn't interested in robots anyway.

Besides that, I liked to take time in the pasture when it was a warm and sunny day to get in touch with myself, if you know what I mean. And after last night, I really needed to feel better. So

it wasn't until almost evening that I got to corner Jared. I'd been rehearsing speeches in my mind all day, but when he finally came out of the dairy barn and crossed to the yard behind the house to wash up, all I could come up with was "Hey."

His black mask was streaked with hay dust, though his muzzle was clean where he'd been putting the cloth over it. I could see the sunset gleam in his eyes as he turned. Jared was about three inches taller than I was, and about six inches wider across the shoulders. I kept hoping I would bulk out to match him, but a couple years ago had resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't.

"Hey," he said conversationally, wiping his paws on his overalls. He started to prime the pump and reached for the bucket that was still half-full of yesterday's filthy water.

"What's goin' on?"

He shrugged. "Nothin'."

"You know what I mean."

He drew his paw back from the bucket and looked uncomfortable. "Look, Clay, I just dunno. It don't feel right."

"Right?" I yelled. "What's that s'posed to mean? It's all right for three years and now suddenly it ain't?"

"Shush," he said, glancing at the house.

"Oh, don't worry 'bout him, he's goin' over the ledgers. You could pull my pants down right here and he wouldn't even look up." I looked up at his muzzle. "Cept it wouldn't *feel* right, would it?" And then I realized he was looking at the dairy barn, not the house.

"Who—*Greta*?" Why did he care if the milking-bot saw us?

He looked at the dirt, at the fence, at the clouds, anywhere but at me. "She's really sweet," he said. "And she cares about me."

I think it was at that moment that I finally realized that I was smarter than my brother.

It woulda made me sad if I wasn't so angry. "Listen, Jared. You mightn'ta noticed, bein' all preoccupied with her sweetness and stuff, but she is a *robot*!"

Now he looked at me, defensively, his ears back. "She has an empathy module. Remember, you installed it so she wouldn't hurt the cows."

"You," I poked him in the chest, "are not a cow. Although you're about as smart as one."

He poked me back. "Shut up, squirt."

I knew I was getting into a fight I couldn't win. Jared outweighed me by thirty pounds. The only logical course was to walk away.

So of course, I picked up the bucket of filthy water and dumped it on him.

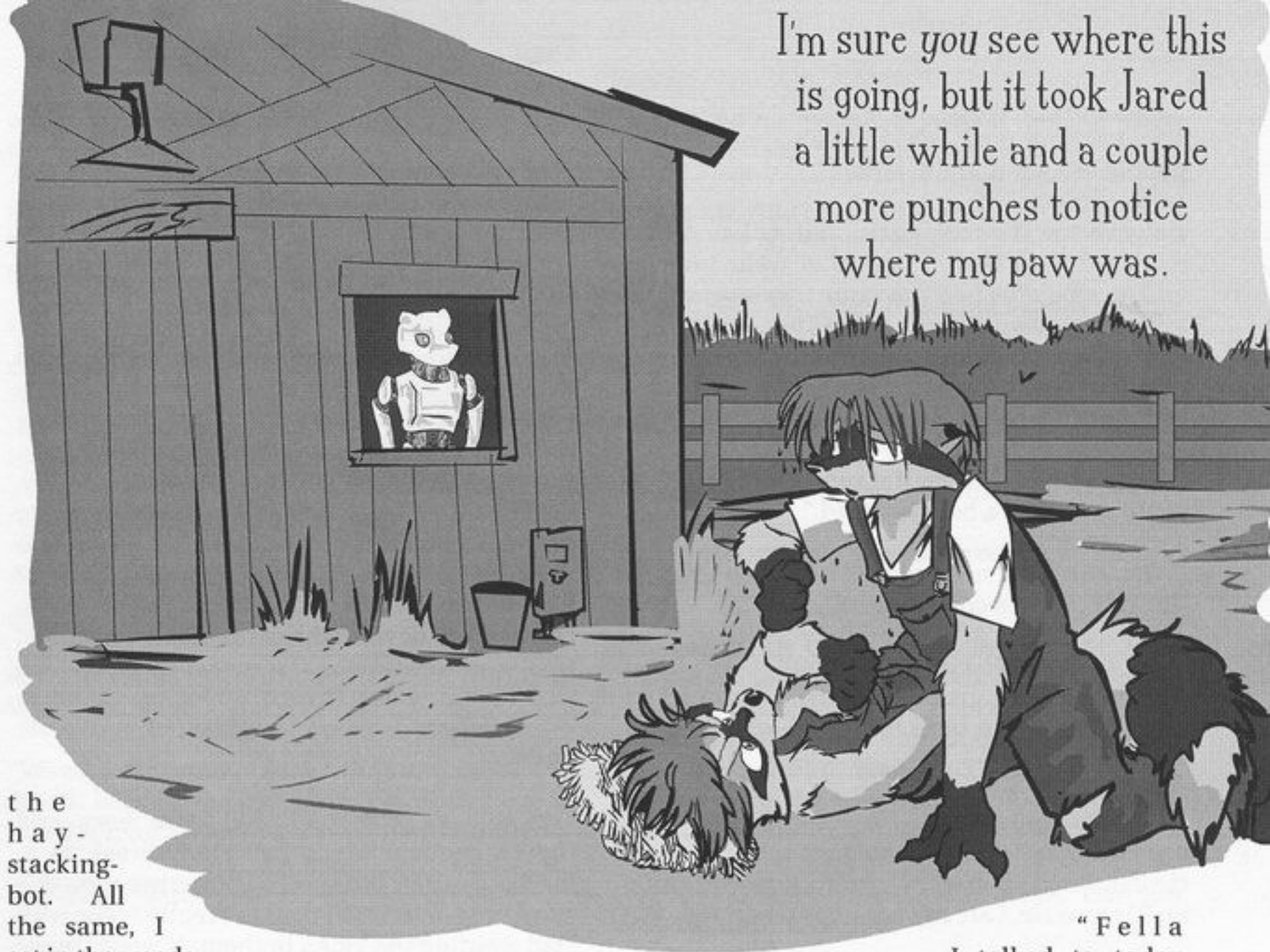
He chased me halfway around the barn, and the only reason I made it that far is that his wet fur kept dripping in his eyes. He knocked me into a pile of weeds and then jumped on me and punched me in the arm twice. I caught his tail with my flailing paws and pulled him off balance, but he grabbed me as he fell. We tumbled over once, then he pushed us around again until he was on top of me. He got a good one in at my ribs and I, the less practiced fighter, ended up with a mouthful of fur as I tried to bite his shoulder.

I'm sure you see where this is going, and I figured it out almost as quick, but it took Jared a little while and a couple more awkward punches to notice where my paw was. We were both panting as he stopped and looked at me, but then he pushed away and stood up, brushing his wet fur out and glancing uneasily at the barn. There in the window I saw the boxy metallic shape of Greta, optic sensors fixed on us.

Jared looked down at me. "Sorry," he said quickly. "I'll see you at dinner." He ducked his head guiltily as he passed the window and trotted back to the yard.

I wanted to laugh or cry or do something, anything, but to be honest, I felt a little creepy with Greta watching me. I knew she was just a robot—heck, I once fixed those same optic sensors when they went a bit wonky and she tried to milk

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the
hay-
stacking-
bot. All
the same, I
sat in the weeds

for a bit longer feeling sorry for myself, then got up and brushed my overalls off, ignoring the gleam of her optics, and walked back to the yard to wash myself off.

I didn't get the overalls clean; they still had grass and burrs and filth stuck to them where Jared had pushed me over. I wasn't worried about Dad noticing, and indeed, when I sat down at the table, he looked at me, rubbed his muzzle, and said, "Clay, why don'tcha look at installin' some video in the sentry-bots?"

I almost dropped the plate I'd been about to spoon some potatoes onto. "Why? I mean, uh, sure, I can do that." Did he know about my extra-curricular activities in the pasture? What else might he have caught onto? I forced my paws to stop shaking. Maybe he was just worried about me and wanted to keep an eye on me, all alone in the pasture. Or maybe he suspected something was going on but wasn't sure what. That seemed the most probable, and was what I was hoping for.

"Fella

I talked to today

sold me a heap o' them optics cheap. Figure the sentry-bots can do more'n just check the fences if we get 'em tricked up right."

Or maybe it had nothing to do with me. I sighed and sat down, meeting his keen eye. "Good thought, Dad. I'll take a look at the optics tomorrow an' set 'em up day after that."

"Say," Jared chirped, "while yer installing stuff, maybe you could put a speech module into Greta?"

I frowned at him, but he had already turned to Dad. "See, that way she could talk to the cows and soothe 'em. Call 'em by name so they'd feel more at ease."

"Maybe she could scream their name while she's milking them," I muttered, and Jared shot me a desperate, angry look.

"Oh, I don't think we want her that loud, Clay," Dad said. "Don't wanna scare 'em."

"No, I reckon not," I said. "She's about makin' people feel good, right, Jared?"

He gave me the look again, but as I've said, I coulda drawn Dad a picture of what I meant and he would've had the same response he did anyway. He said, "That's a fine idea, Jared. Clay, you got a speech module around? What about that one you took outta the broken sales-bot last year?"

I could've lied, but he did pay attention to inventory. "It had a bad lisp, Dad."

"Well, she don't need to be no English teacher. Just has to call a coupla cows."

"And there ain't no 's' in 'Jared'. Ow!" Jared punched my leg under the table. I stomped on his foot with my bare heel, and we glared at each other.

"Go ahead and do that after you done the optics on the sentry-bots," Dad said, and the topic was closed. Jared sat back with a triumphant smile on his muzzle. I ate my potatoes gloomily.

That night, I pulled my tail between my legs and curled up facing away from Jared on my side of the bed. When he got into bed, I waited until he'd turned out the light, then said "Clank. Whirr. Oh..."

He grunted, but didn't react, so like a good little brother, I kept going. "Clank. Thunk. Oh, yes. Oh, whirr!"

The floor, I found out, is very hard, and colder than I would've expected. I heard Dad on the other side of the door. "No roughhousing in there."

"I just fell out of bed," I called between giggles. I grinned at Jared as I got back in, but he'd already turned back over and curled up.

I took as long as possible installing the optics in the sentry bots, spending entire days out in the pasture and enjoying the last remnants of my privacy out there. Oh, I could disable the video on the 'bots if I really wanted privacy, but that would affect the security videos and raise all kinds of other questions, and when you got down to it, it really wasn't worth it. I don't want

to give you the idea that I went up to the pasture and played with myself every day. It was just that now that I couldn't, I wanted to even more.

Kinda like with Jared.

The security was important, too. We shared a fence with the Hendersons, a nice fox family whose farmhouse was about ten miles along the road. They came over for dinner sometimes. But they didn't patrol their fences regularly, because they kept their cattle closer in to the house. So predators and rustlers could get into their fields, and from theirs into ours. Not that we had a lot for them to take; maybe twenty to thirty dairy cows and a couple bulls, a herd of free-roaming sheep, and some chickens that we kept in a coop (which we locked up when the Hendersons came to visit). But you never know.

Dad had put up a good conductive fence, and the sentry-bots would catch any break in it, but they weren't so good at detecting someone tunneling under. So I couldn't really argue with Dad wanting the video in them. It would make my job easier.

But I didn't want to install the speech unit in Greta. So I delayed for a week, tinkering here and there, adjusting the transmission frequency and claiming I kept getting interference. One week stretched into two, and then Jared took me behind the house one afternoon and said that if I didn't install the speech unit soon, he would install it forcefully under my tail.

Well, I wasn't *that* desperate for attention from him. I spent a couple evenings the following week taking Greta apart once her milking was done. The first evening was just to reacquaint myself with how everything was wired, find the socket for the speech unit, figure out the paths to reroute to get the empathy module hooked up to it, and so forth. I considered just tossing the empathy module, but I had already begun to realize that it wouldn't help anything if I did.

The main issue was that Greta's operating system was two versions ahead of the sales bot's, and I didn't know if the speech unit would be backwards compatible. Only one way to find

out, so I installed it, reassembled her brain, and turned her on.

She emitted a deafening belch, tipped over on her back, and lay there with her hands milking the air.

"All set," I said to Jared, who was hovering like an expectant father. His expression changed faster than I would've thought possible. "All right, all right. But I'm sick of screwing around in your girlfriend's head."

"Just fix her," he growled.

"I'm going to have to get an upgrade off the net," I said.

Greta sputtered, then belched again, and this time didn't stop.

"Wow," I observed. "Better than Dad after his fourth beer." I couldn't keep a straight face or tone for long, though. It was just too funny.

"FIX HER!" Jared yelled, paws over his ears.

I stopped laughing long enough to reach in and shut her off. The noise stopped abruptly and her arms fell to her sides.

"Cripes, Clay," he said, and stalked out.

I wish I could say I felt disappointed, but I was glad it hadn't worked. I could probably stretch out the net research to two or three days before Jared resumed threatening me.

In the meantime, I started belching. A lot. Only when Jared was around, of course, and the looks I got never failed to send me into giggles. So at least I was getting a little fun out of it. I had to stop when Dad ordered me to take some bicarb, which really did make me feel queasy. By that time, though, I had the upgrade downloaded and ready to go, so that evening after dinner I went ahead and installed it, Jared still hovering over me.

"Tell me something," I said as I fastened the unit in place and started to screw the cover back on. "How do you know you like her if she can't talk?"

He opened his muzzle to snap at me, but when he saw I was at least partly serious, he closed it again. "She pays special attention to me. Listens to me. And I can tell she understands. She's got a pretty advanced brain."

"It's a C-40." For short. IntelliBot's Centauri line of main processors, 40 chained 188-THz chips. Potentially smarter than Jared.

"Yeah. Whatever. She really cares."

So do I, I thought. "Almost done."

He craned his neck over her excitedly. "She got the most beautiful eyes."

I looked at the blank optics as I was reaching behind her for the reset. "Yeah. Sure."

They flickered to life, and focused up on Jared as he was bending over her. There was a short crackle from the speaker, but no belching. A deep voice said, "Jaaaa-red?"

"Hi," he said softly, then looked at me. "Can you make it, uh..."

"Yeah. Hold still, Greta." I took a screwdriver and popped the cover off, exposing the face of the speech unit. I fiddled with one of the settings. "Say something now."

"Thank you, Clay," she said, and her voice sounded more feminine now.

"That good?"

Jared nodded to me. "Yeah. Hi, Greta." He put his paw on her metallic arm. I got up and grabbed my tools, and headed for the door.

"Hey, Clay." I turned. "Thanks."

I waved a paw at him, and walked out.

He hadn't come to bed when I fell asleep, but he was there when I woke up, stretched out in the dawn's pale light. He had a big stupid smile on his muzzle, and I sat there for a while, stuck between conflicting feelings of wanting to kiss it and wanting to slap the hell out of it. Confused, I finally just got out of bed and headed out to the kitchen to get some breakfast.

The oatmeal had a funny taste that I didn't recognize until I'd already heaped two spoonfuls of it into my muzzle, at which point the red pepper had already started to work its magic. I howled, grabbed a glass of milk and threw it more or less in the direction of my muzzle. It helped nearly not at all. I staggered to the stove and groped for the cook-bot's switch through a haze of tears and milk.

"Why does everything have to go wrong at once?" I shouted to my father as he entered the kitchen, rubbing his eyes.

"What's gone wrong? Where's Jared?"

"Still in bed," I grumbled, wiping my eyes and looking glumly at the pot of oatmeal. It would all have to be thrown out. "Cook's screwing up again. Pepper in the oatmeal."

My father has a greater tolerance for pepper than I do, and I saw him eyeing the oatmeal, clearly calculating whether it would be too spicy for him. "Don't try it, Dad."

That cinched it. He took a spoonful and ate it. He didn't let his eyes widen, but I saw the tears building up before he turned away. "Mm. That's...no good."

"Milk's okay." He poured while I looked at the cook-bot.

"Can you fix her?"

"Yeah." I saw right away what the problem was. One of her optics was fuzzing. She'd mistaken the red pepper for cinnamon. "Looks like she needs a new set of optics."

"Any left over from the sentries?"

I shook my head. "There are a couple sentries still without." I scratched my ears, thinking. My solution was practical, but I can't say it wasn't also born of jealousy. "Greta probably could get by with these for a bit. I could take these and put them in her, take hers and put them here."

Dad nodded, and clapped me on the shoulder. "Good thinking, Clay. I'll get replacements when they go on sale. Meantime, some breakfast..."

He started rummaging through the cupboards. "Where is that celery flour?"

I detached the optics and hurried out of there, figuring I could get the work done on Greta before Jared made it up to the barn, especially if Dad was going to cook breakfast from scratch. I was hungry, but I knew Jared wouldn't let me take Greta's eyes, so I had to do it before he got there.

I got to the dairy barn and found Greta setting up her milking for the day. Without thinking, I just reached for her off switch.

"Hello, Clay. What are you doing?"

My paw jumped. "Um. Hi, Greta. Sorry, I need to swap out your eyes."

"Why?"

Cook was the only other 'bot with a speech module and she never asked questions like this. I found it a bit unnerving. "Cook needs to borrow them. Hers are fuzzing out. I need you to use them for a while."

Even though I joked with Jared about Greta making clanking noises, her thinking process was completely silent. Only the whirr of her cooling fans made a background noise. "I won't mithtake Charlie for a cow again, will I?"

I snorted. "No. It looks like they're just fuzzed, not haywire like before."

"All right. Will it take long?"

"No. Just a couple minutes."

"Clay?" I had reached for her switch again.

"What?"

"Pleathe don't tell Jared. I don't want him to know."

"All right." I switched her off and set to work swapping the optics, thinking about the absurdity of it. A robot who was vain? Maybe she really did care about Jared. I'd have to look up the specs on that empathy module. Certainly Greta seemed more complex than any of the

other 'bots we used. I looked up at Charlie, the hay-stacker, who was just complex enough to whistle a series of random tunes while he worked.

The optics were simple enough to switch. It took maybe twenty minutes, during which I felt progressively more guilty. But Greta was fine, and it would be only temporary.

The door of the barn crashed open just as I was preparing to turn Greta back on. Jared leaped at me and knocked me over. "Get away from her!"

I'd already put her optics into my pocket, fortunately. He knocked the wind out of me and knelt on my chest, staring down at me, his mask wrinkled in anger. "Dad said you were going to take her eyes. Put them back!"

I caught a breath, looked at Greta, and quickly tried to remember whether Jared knew as much about optics as I did. "Can't..." I panted. "I didn't...take them."

"What? Dad said..."

I tried to push him off me, with no luck. "I just wanted to look at her eyes so I could see how to fix cook's." I stared at him defiantly.

He thought about it and then, to my relief, got up. "Wait there." He walked over to Greta and switched her on, looking carefully at her eyes.

"Hello, Jared," she said after a minute.

"How are your eyes?" he said without preamble.

"Fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeth. Why?"

He looked at me. "Nothing. I was just worried."

She put an arm to his side, and he waved me away. "All right, Clay. Sorry."

I got shakily to my feet. *She's just a machine!* I wanted to yell, but then I was worried I'd hurt

Greta's feelings. Sheesh. I stumbled out and walked back to the kitchen.

Dad had thankfully not been able to find the celery flour (I wouldn't dare throw it out, but that didn't mean I had to make it easy for him or Cook to find) and had settled for making another batch of oatmeal. It was cool and lumpy, and stuck to my muzzle, but at least it was filling. I wolfed down some and then set about putting Greta's eyes in cook.

The next few days were pretty miserable. I spent a lot of them hanging out with the sentry bots in the pasture. They weren't terribly good company, as they were preoccupied with the integrity of the fence, and didn't have speech modules besides, but I didn't have anyone else to talk to. I felt more alone than ever, and the worst part of it was that now I could see a little better what Jared saw in Greta. She was someone else he could talk to, someone else he could be with. I was half-tempted to run down to the Hendersons' farm, but I'd never be back in time, and I didn't even know them that well.

I wanted to tell someone I was afraid of losing my brother, that the fact that he preferred being with a machine to being with his own brother made me feel hurt and angry, and that I basically had no privacy anymore. Except in the evenings, which he was spending with Greta now, when I lay alone in bed until I fell asleep. I didn't know how long it was going to go on, but fortunately for me, it wasn't much longer.

I was awoken one night the following week by shouting outside. The door of our bedroom flew open, and Dad pushed Jared into it. "I won't have you committin' unnatural acts! Now get in bed with your brother!" He was furious, madder than I'd ever seen him. His tail was bristled out and I could see the whites of his eyes around their dark irises. He was even snarling, showing teeth, which he never did around us.

Jared, by contrast, had his ears back and his tail tucked under himself. He was hunched over, cowering, and trying to fend off Dad with one paw while his other held his overalls up. When Dad slammed the door, Jared just stood there in the center of the room, shaking.

"Wha' happened?" I blinked at him.

What's goin' on? I ain't never heard a cow moan like that!



He shook his head miserably. "He snuck up on us. I guess Greta didn't see him...she usually keeps an eye out. I just heard him say 'What's goin' on? I ain't never heard a cow moan like that,' and then he was inside, an'...he saw ever'thing."

I couldn't help but feel a little responsible. I mean, about the eye thing, at least. "Uh. Sorry."

He lurched toward the bed and knelt beside it. "Clay, you gotta help us. He said first thing to-morra he's gonna ship Greta off to some dairy farm on th'other side of the world!"

"What can I do?"

His ears perked up and he looked brightly, desperately at me. "Take out her regulator. I can drive the truck an' we'll go to the city together. We talked about it. I can clean places and she can always find work."

"As a milking machine?"

"They gotta have cows somewhere in the city, don't they?"

I let that go. "Look, Jared, I can't take out the regulator. It's soldered in. I'd need a whole tool

set and it'd take me a couple days. It ain't meant to just pop out."

His ears folded down again. He lay his muzzle on the bed and covered it with his arms and started to cry.

"Jeez, Jared, you'll get over her."

"Never," he said through his tears and fur. "There ain't nobody else around here. At least you could maybe go out with Celia Henderson in a few years, when she's older...Dad'll never get another 'bot like her. There ain't anyone like her."

Hell. "Listen, I might be able to help. I could maybe bypass the regulator. Like when we buy a new 'bot, you know? You have to re-encode the regulator to the new location. Well, I could maybe re-encode hers to a blank." There was no maybe about it. I could do it. I just didn't know if I wanted to.

"Would you, Clay? Please? I'll do anything you want."

So I flipped back the covers and showed him what I wanted.

I couldn't go through with it, though. It wasn't the same anymore, as much as I wanted it. He was willing, but he wasn't doing it because he wanted to, and I guess that was the difference for me. I pushed him away after a minute and drew my legs up.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want that no more," I said. I was trying not to cry in front of him.

"What do you want, Clay? We gotta hurry here."

"I just want..." Don't say it. Just do what he wants and then he'll be gone.

Gone.

"Just want you to love me." Great. I had now completed the transformation to utterly pathetic idiot.

He laughed, and at first I thought he was laughing at me. I curled my tail up around my muzzle. But then he stopped and pulled my tail down. "Clay? You know I love ya, right?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Listen, little brother," he said, "Just 'cause me an' Greta found each other don't mean I don't love you. You're my *brother*. I'll always love you. Even when I'm gone to the city. Yeah, you're a pain in the tail, but you're mine."

"You're goin' to the city."

"And you're gonna come visit me." He poked me in the chest. "Me an' Greta."

I managed a bit of a grin then. "I'll have to," I said. "You ain't got nobody else to call when she breaks."

He laughed and hugged me, and I hugged him back, and it was the best I ever felt in that bed, I promise you.



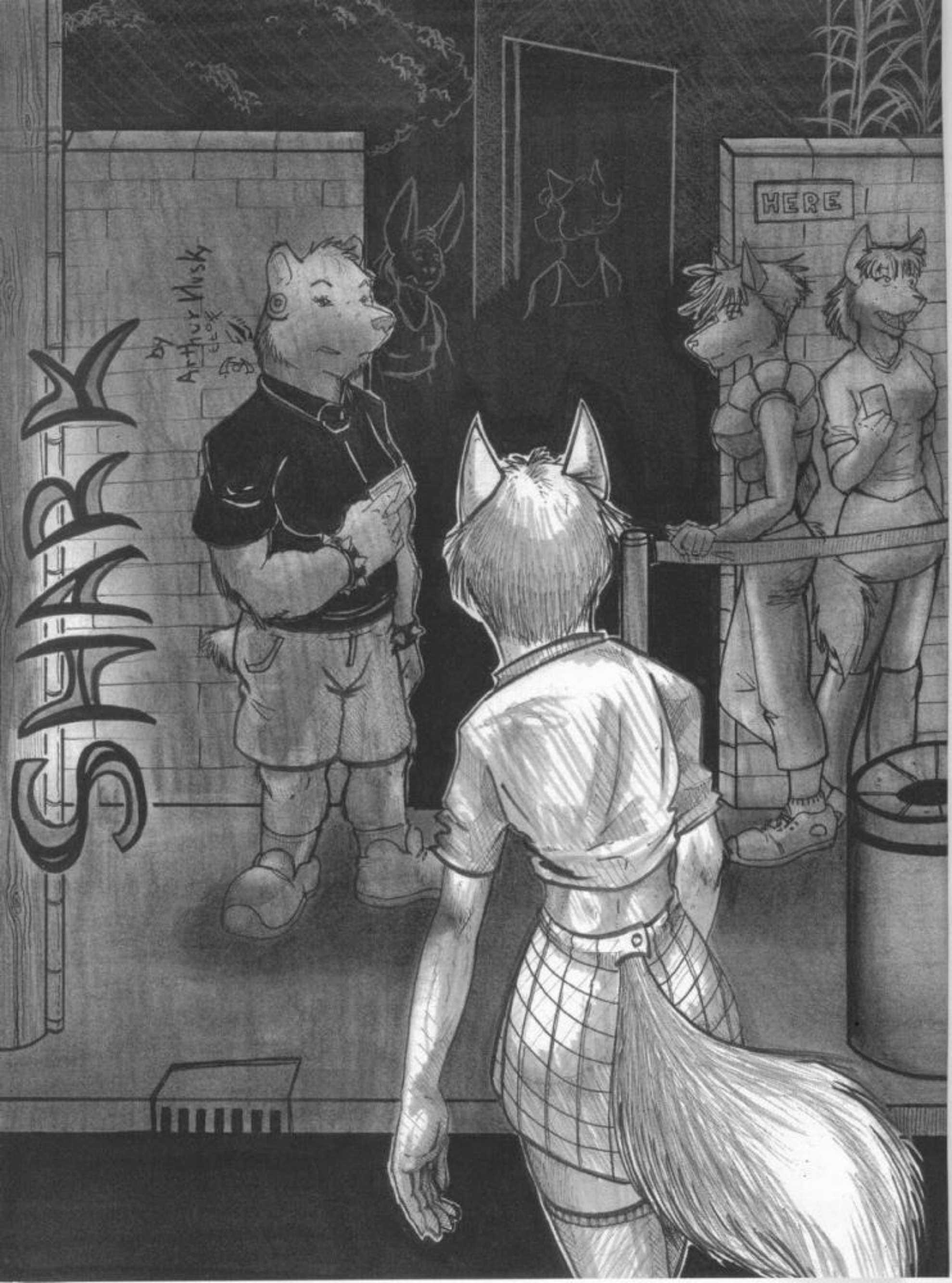
Dad was pretty tore up about Jared and Greta taking off. He sat me down for a long talk, at first trying to figure out my part in the whole thing, then telling me how sorry he was for not bringing us boys up right. I think he thought that if he just fed us, eventually some female raccoons would wander along and there'd be cubs, just like with the dairy stock. I didn't really wanna talk about that, so I made him talk about how the farm was gonna run without Jared. I offered to milk the cows until he got a new 'bot, and he said we'd do it together, which left me speechless for a while.

It's six months later now, and we still haven't gotten a 'bot. We don't talk much, but we do the milking together and it's nice to have that time. Dad says that maybe there were some things about the robot farming that he didn't anticipate, like how it didn't allow us time to be a family. He and I sat down a month ago on the net and started doing some searches for other raccoon farms out there, and we found a couple. He wants me to get to meet some other kits my age, and it looks like maybe middle of next year I'll be able to do that. There's this farm with a daughter my age and a son Jared's age; their son just got married and is settling down on the farm, and they want to marry the daughter off. She and I been talking over the net, and she seems pretty cool. They're gonna come visit in a couple months, and then we'll go down and visit them, and if we hit it off, maybe I'll bring her back here and we can settle down. If not, we got a couple other farms eager to send their daughters to a successful place like ours.

I get letters from Jared once a week. He and Greta are scraping by. They have a three-week old toaster. I didn't ask how that happened. I want to go visit him, too, when I can. I always reckoned I'd be the one to go to the city, but I like it here on the farm, and he's happy in the city. Funny how life works.

So I got maybe another year before things start gettin' interesting here. I'm looking forward to meeting this raccoon girl, but I still miss Jared. He's my only brother, and there's no way I'll ever find a replacement for him.

But hell, I still got a lot of spare parts kickin' around. Maybe I'll build one.



If this were an ocean, I would be the shark that preys on everything else. All of them are beautiful, yes, but most of them I've had before; and tonight I feel like fresh meat.



Then among them all I spot her. To everyone else she is nothing special, very meek and out of style. But I can see that underneath the thin clothes she is wearing she hides a body that all of the others wish they had.



She's inexperienced too, I can tell by the way she looks around the floor; she's alone, and this is the first time she's ever been to a club like this.



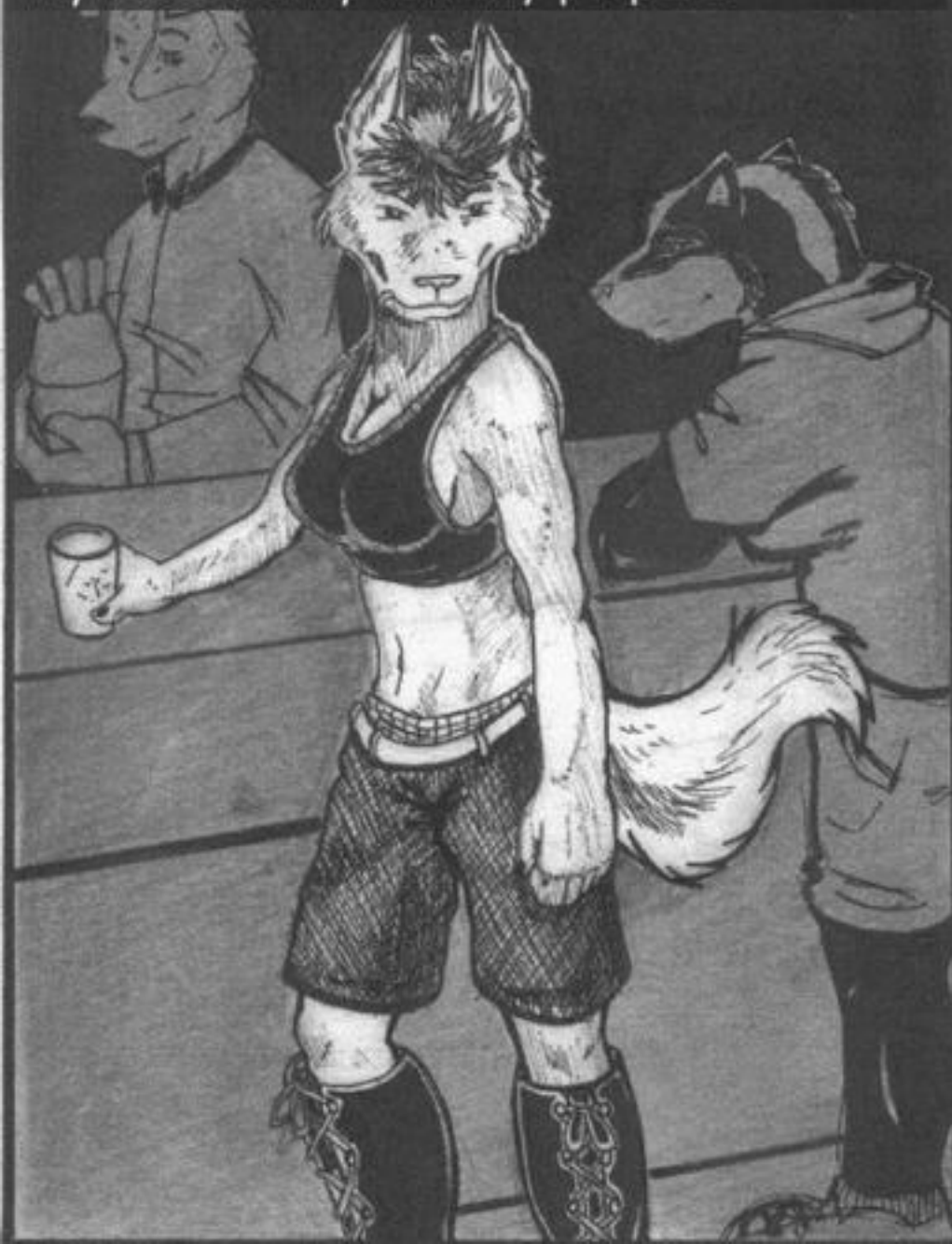
She's perfect...

There is a technique to seducing someone in this meat market. The first step is to make eye contact, but I take my time to admire her.



Then she looks back, her blue eyes screaming innocence; it's irresistible. You can almost see the thoughts in her head. She blushes and shies back. Like I said...perfect.

It's time to make my move, and the grin on my face clearly tells my purpose.



I introduce myself and ask her name. "Tamar" she says. I know it's fake, I know it's not her real name, but it doesn't matter.



Now I know what she's here for. The same reason I am...

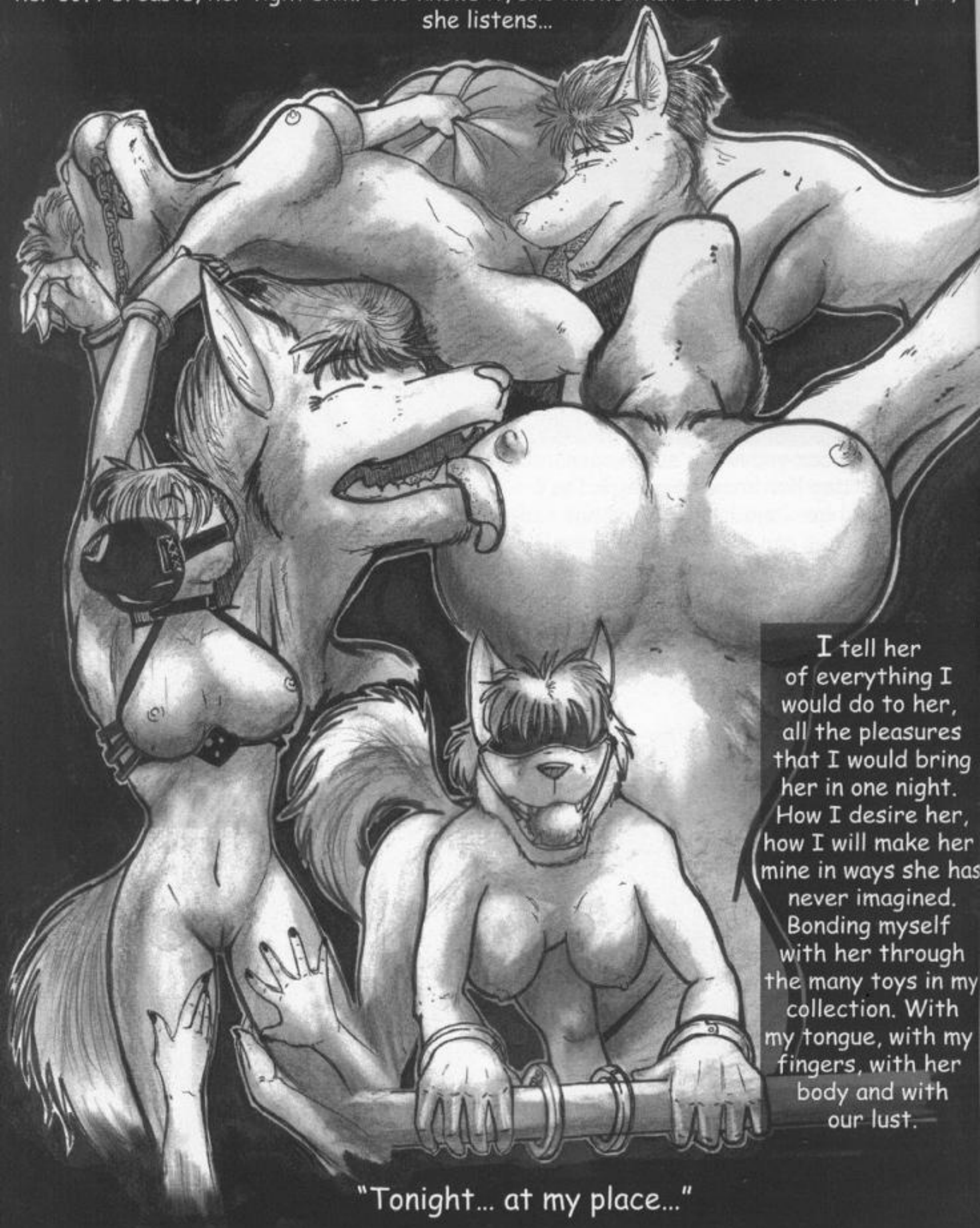


"You're gorgeous you know," I whisper into her ear, letting her know how much I'm attracted to her, and how much she is turning me on. I can feel her skin warming up. She's liking it, she's still here. I offer her my experienced tongue, licking her ear; my hands take their time roaming her body as we both move to the bass of the music.



Lower and lower, over every curve my hands' roam, exploring her soft body inch by inch. Then I discover something that drives me crazy, drives me wild, my weakness, my highest desire, the one thing that makes me shiver and drool. She's a virgin.

Then all bets are off, lust takes over, my mind runs wild, I want her, I want her body, her soft breasts, her tight skin. She knows it, she knows that I lust for her. I whisper, she listens...



I tell her of everything I would do to her, all the pleasures that I would bring her in one night. How I desire her, how I will make her mine in ways she has never imagined. Bonding myself with her through the many toys in my collection. With my tongue, with my fingers, with her body and with our lust.

"Tonight... at my place..."



Maybe she was nervous?

Maybe I'm losing my touch?

Maybe I came on too strong?



Before she ran out she did take my number after all...
She'll call; I know it...
I could see it in her face.



Quite a night for an old shark like myself

But DAMN she sure was fine...
young, firm, innocent
and more than ready to learn...

She'll call...



-BEEP-
-BEEP-



How do I get to your place?

FIN...

SPICED FOXES

by Sheela Ardrian

"Cooking is like love: it should be entered into with abandon or not at all."

— Harriet van Horne

My sweetheart wants cookies, has conceived a sudden lust for gingerbread. He licks his muzzle as he describes to me the depths of this desire. I smile, and take myself into the kitchen.

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

I pull out the recipe book, its weight a familiar friend in my paw. I gather the ingredients — a little of this, a little of that. Cinnamon and nutmeg, allspice and ginger, a generous pinch of fresh-grated orange peel. Eggs and butter and milk. Sugar. My sweetheart sneaks up behind me and kisses my ear. Startled, I jump — now I have flour on my muzzle. Laughing, I push him away, saying maybe later.

Variety is the spice of life.

I knead the dough, enjoying the flex and press of it against my palms. Slowly it stiffens in my paws. Small pieces crumble away from the main mass. I snatch one, meaning to taste it — hesitate — then pop it into my mouth.



Never trust a skinny cook.

The rich, sensuous flavor
lingers on my tongue like a kiss
as I roll the dough thin and smooth.
I position the cookie cutter and,
hey presto!
Gingerbread foxes cavort across the
fur-colored dough.
With quick motions I move them to
cookie sheets
and slide them into the oven,
silver metal cool against my fingerpads
as the hot air flutters across my face.
My sweetheart
presses against me, murmuring
a question.
Soon, I promise, as my tail
curls around his knees.

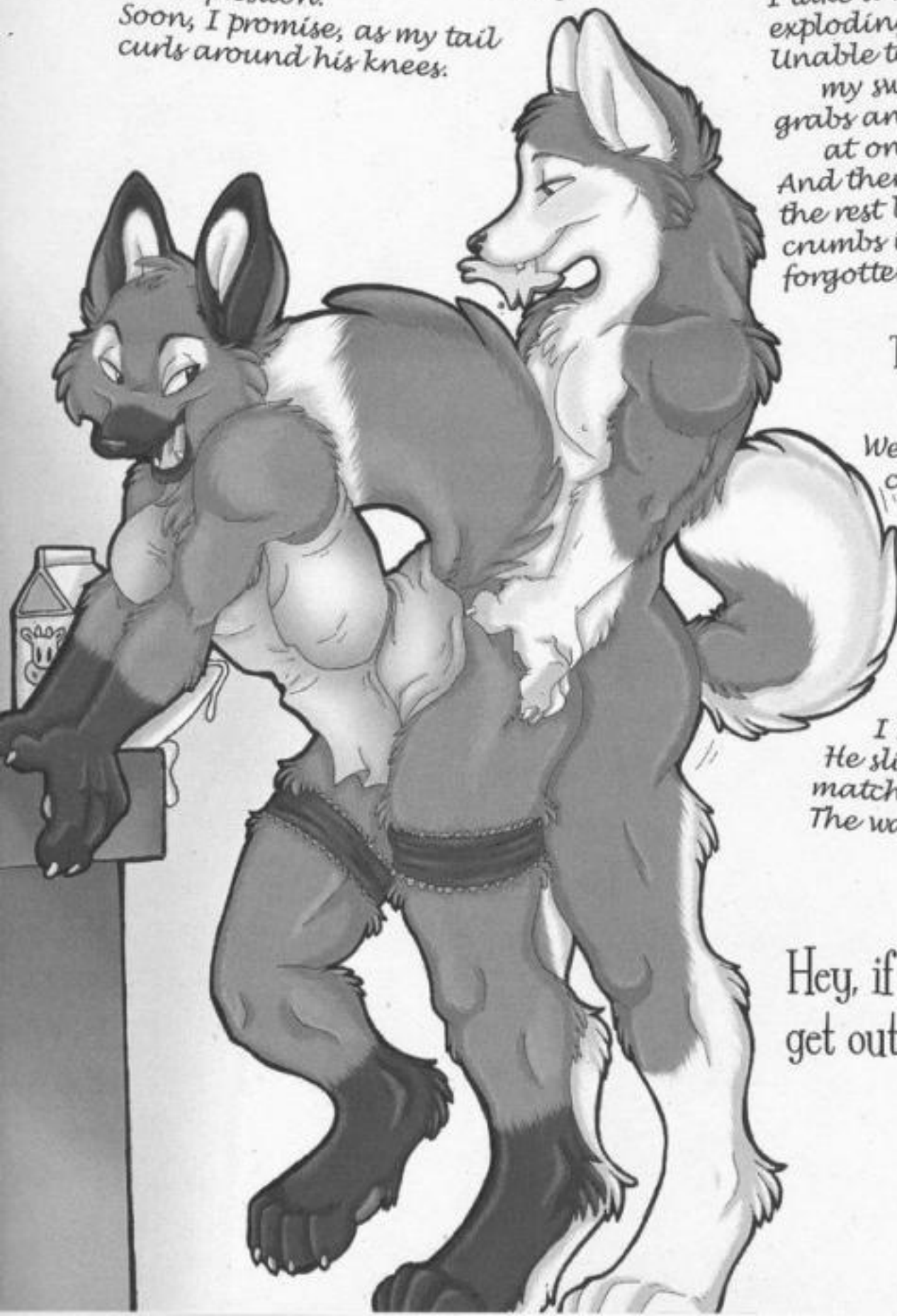
Now we're cooking!

Through the tiny window, I can see
my foxes growing plump and perfect
in the oven.
I watch them carefully — gingerbread
is finicky,
and the tails will burn if left in a
minute too long.
The bell rings, and I whisk them out,
setting them to cool on wire racks.
I take a nibble, the spice
exploding in my mouth.
Unable to wait a moment longer,
my sweetheart
grabs another and bites off half of it
at once.
And then our eyes meet, and we crush
the rest between us, gingerbread
crumbs in our fur,
forgotten.

That's how the cookie crumbles.

We kiss and nip, his mouth
closing over my muzzle. I can
feel him
pressed against my hips,
hard as a rolling pin. With
urgent hands
he turns me toward the counter
and bends me over its
convenient height.
I hike up my dress.
He slides inside me, a flawless fit,
matching his hunger to mine.
The warm air shimmers with bliss.

Hey, if you can't stand the heat,
get out of the kitchen!



Danang Heat

by Patrick "Bahumat" Rochefort

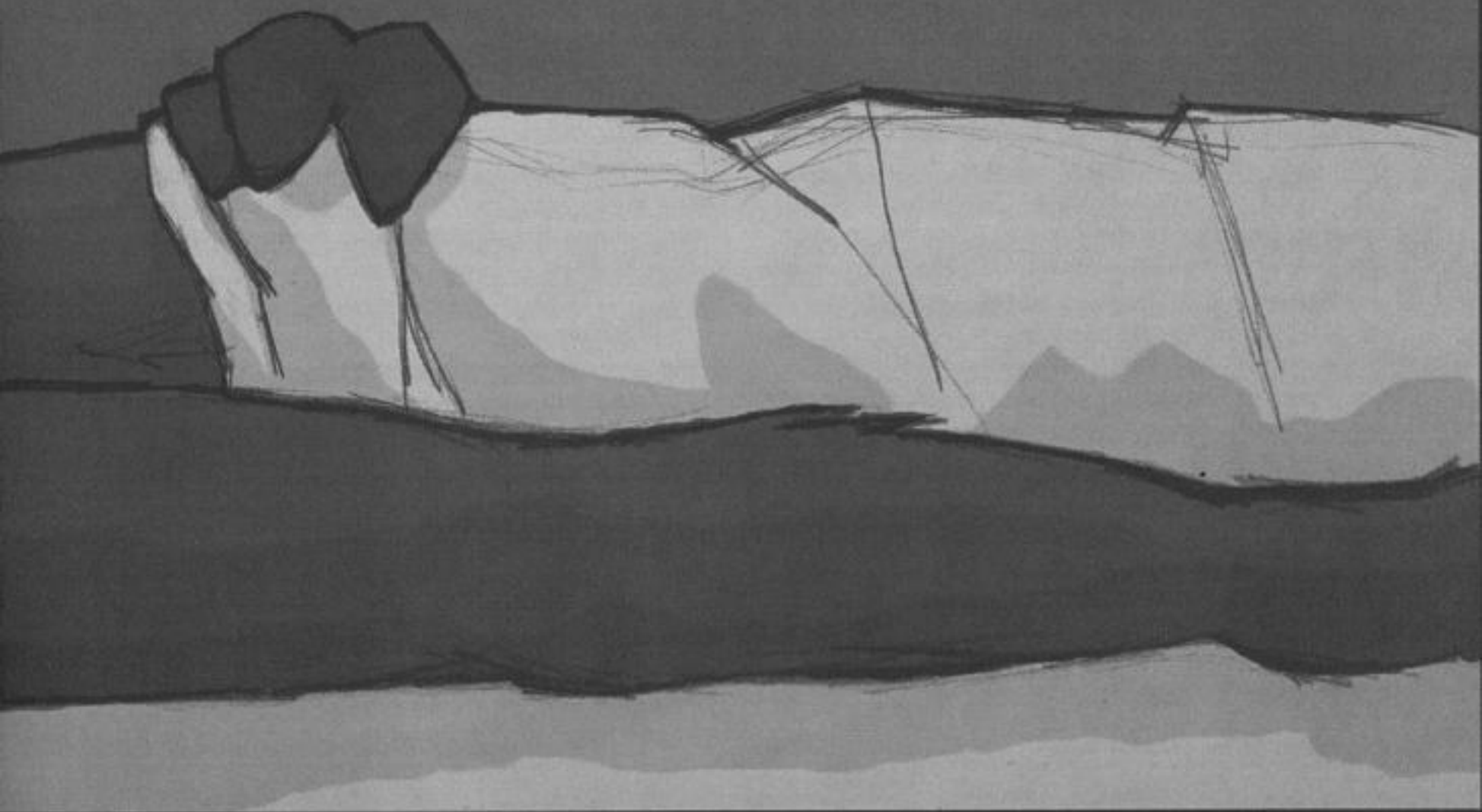


illustrated by AlumaSquirrel

The cock, when he finally had a chance to see it pulled from his gullet, was enormous: fourteen inches of gleaming black water buffalo. Balus flopped back down on the bed, lathered in sweat, a last rope of his cum trailing off the tip of his cock onto the gryphon's beak. The room stank of sweat and sex, dust motes gleaming in the air under the listless turning of the ceiling fan.

The cum in the gryphon's mouth tasted like grass stems.

Balus smirked down at the gryphon, still wearing his combat boots and little else. All casual American arrogance, he studied the bound gryphon at the foot of the bed, blue plumage matted in dirt and sweat and a good bit of cum, the beak still emitting a faint whimper into the air. The buffalo fiddled with his dog tags over his broad, black chest, remembering how those requisitioned velcro straps had come in handy. The gryphon was bound with hands behind his back, hog-tied to his ankles, the pink tip of his cock still unflagging. Balus grinned again. Four hours he'd kept that little bitch waiting. Oh well. A lesson to be learned: Vietnam was hell.



PT was rugby today, gooks versus the GI's. Three water buffalo were on the line for the gooks, and they were making a good showing of themselves, easily plowing through the boars the GI's were putting up. The game was rough, but fun; shoulder-checks were the extent of the tackles, and the ball was getting churned in the mud something fierce. Laughter echoed over the field as they played through the ditches and earthen banks of the old rice paddy. The helicopter pad sat in the middle of it, presently unoccupied, and it made a good half-field zone.

Private Rolente was playing quarterback, or so he thought, the American's interpretation of rugby having more to do with football than its actual roots. "Sergeant, you holding up okay?" he asked the backside of the water buffalo taking center.

"Just fine, private. 'Bout time I had some boys my own size to rough-house with," came Balus' reply. Most of the boys from home hated this country—the steamy, constant heat, the bugs, the jungle, the paddies, and most especially the gooks. But Balus loved it; Vietnam was in his blood. His parents had emigrated from here to Texas a generation ago, and this was a chance to see others of his own kind in someplace other than a mirror. Balus had enlisted early, and jumped at the chance to take a tour of duty here.

Balus hiked the ball, then crashed forward into two other buffalo, taking their charge and straining against them, hooves churning up mud and water. All parties grinned as they battled. This was PT; this was the life, when the shooting wasn't hot and bombs weren't rearranging Danang's cafes.

Sun beat down on Balus' blue-black fur as he played, wallowing in the water. The game went on for half an hour before a careless hoof caught his left shoulder, slicing open a gash about an inch wide. This brought an immediate halt to the game; shit like this turned septic in this heat, and the mud working into the wound promised gangrene if left untreated. He showed the cut to Rolente. "You believe this shit? Where's the medic's office now?"

The rottweiler shook his head. "Moved down by the colonel's office. New surgeon, some griff from Atlanta. Can't miss him: bright blue feathers. No wonder they keep his ass from crawling jungle. He sticks out a mile," Rolente rumbled with a grin.



Veronath had already decided he hated this shit. The colonel was riding his ass to get the new field hospital ready, logistics was dragging their asses over the supplies needed, the heat was going to kill him for sure, and worst of fucking all, "There's no fucking lice-spray!" he exploded aloud. The nurse in the other room nearly dropped her tray at the outburst.

"It'll be in next week, doctor. I know, sorry. They're out of flea bath too, and what little the boys have they're not parting with for money or beer," Luize replied, looking concerned. She scratched her arm irritably, and caught the doctor doing the same. The bugs were killer, and they'd used what stock they had last week when the first casualties came in from the DMZ. The tigress grunted, sharing his irritation. Being hot and itchy wasn't much fun, and showering only helped temporarily; you just couldn't dry fast enough before the water in your fur warmed to air temperature again, leaving you feeling muggy and gross.

The gryphon sat by his desk, glaring at the angry yellow sunlight outside. "They're out playing in the rice paddy again, for fuck sakes," he muttered. "Luize, you see that? If any of them swallows that water, they'll be in here tomorrow with symptoms like they took Ipecac non-orally."

Luize had to laugh at this, even if only bitterly. She'd already seen what dysentery could do to perfectly good whitewashed walls. She walked over and patted him on the shoulder, chuckling. "What a disappointment to you, I know," she replied. "You'll get to see all those cute asses at their worst."

Veronath flicked a warning glance at her, but said nothing. He'd never told her he was a fag, but it was obvious from the start, for her. After all, she was a slim, attractive tigress in a nurse's uniform, and after two weeks of working with

him without once catching him ogling or grabassing, the message was pretty clear. She kept quiet, in public, for his sake; he was a good surgeon, and it was rather nice to have a professional relationship with a guy that didn't start and end with the length of her skirt.

"Uh-oh, here comes one. Hard to tell a GI from a gook when they're covered like that. Big boy, just your kind!" she said with a hoot, pointing out the window to the passing form of Sergeant Balus, mud-spattered and stripped to just his pants and boots. He came in through the door a few moments later and nodded to the doctor. Luize was already on her way to prepare a shower for him. *Christ*, she thought, as she listened to their voices in the other room. The guy looks like he was built out of a refrigerator. She'd seen barrels that could have fit in that torso.



Veronath bit his knuckle mentally as he worked, while the sergeant on his table idly watched the listlessly turning ceiling fan.

Times like this were a trial for any good medico; Veronath was sure the memory of Balus' backside and ass was burnt into his head, looking like it had been polished from ebony under the water of the shower, chiseled muscle rippling as the bull washed himself. It had been terrifyingly tempting to linger and stare, but Luize had shot him a warning look and he'd backed off. He remembered the size of those balls, like tangerines, hanging between the broad-muscled legs. And now those balls lay on the surgical table, a white sheet covering them and the Sergeant's hips, and little else. The thick skin and short fur steadily closed under the gryphon's stitches.

"Who won, Sergeant?" he asked quietly, as his needle once more bit in. Balus didn't flinch, or even much seem to notice, though the thickness of his skin was making Veronath wonder if he'd be better off with a staple-gun at this point.

"Gooks, I think," came the deep-throated reply. "Same as last game. They all seem to know the paddies pretty well. The good ol' boys from back home can't cut it in mud like that. Kicked a few asses in there though, a good game."

Balus smiled softly in pride. The local buffalo were well honed from working the fields, but even they couldn't match Balus' mass of muscle built from two years of laying brick, and now toting his SAW around in training. He hadn't seen much action yet, and that was fine by him; fighting in the jungle sounded about as much fun as gangrene anyway.

The surgeon, meanwhile, was trying not to dawdle too much. Some part of his mind was threatening to make his knees tremble. Each of the sergeant's hands must have been big enough to palm his head with ease, meaty and muscled, and the size of the bulge under the sheet was the sort of thing that size-queen dreams are made of. "Hey, you want to get a beer after this?" Veronath asked quietly, dry-mouthed, his eyes focusing on the cut he was finally drawing shut to avoid looking anywhere else. Being outed, particularly to an officer, meant instant dishonorable discharge, but he was about at the point where he no longer cared.

It had been months since he'd been fucked.

Balus flicked an ear his way, a practically Pavlovian response to the word "beer".

"Sure," he replied.



Luize watched them go, the sergeant in a new set of fatigues, and Veronath, having thrown off his white coat, in a black shirt and olive pants that clashed with his bright blue plumage. She grinned as she sorted the last of her papers away for the day. "Doctor Veronath, you little slut," she said to herself admiringly. "Just what the hell do you think you're going to do with a big ol' boy like that?"

It was almost comic, watching them depart. The sergeant must have easily stood six-four, probably over three hundred pounds; not an ounce of fat on him. And the surgeon was shorter than she was: five-six maybe, and less than a hundred-fifty soaking wet. She touched up the last of her work, locked up the files, and smiled as she murmured to herself, "Go get him, doctor."

Veronath was, by this time, out the door and oblivious; he walked alongside the sergeant, trying hard not to get caught staring. He'd politely turned away as Balus had gotten dressed, the bandage shining white off the gunmetal-blue chest, and had caught yet another glimpse of that ass bending over as he'd pulled his pants up around his ankles...The surgeon ruthlessly put down the thought, his groin stirring from the memory. They crossed the encampment and through the gate, giving a salute to the MP's at the checkpoint. The men on the guns were relaxed; besides the occasional bombing, there hadn't been much Viet Cong activity yet, and the front line was still a few hundred clicks away. He irritably scratched at his forearm again, which Balus noticed.

"Out of Lysol?"

The gryphon nodded at the question. "Lysol" was typical slang for their various anti-parasite washes, playing off of "lice-all". "Yeah. Logistics is really fucking us around. Good that the front-line boys are getting it, but the rest of us get to suffer."

Balus clapped him on the shoulder with a meaty, heavy hand, his drawling southern voice rumbling the very air around him. "I've got a spare tin on me I can give you. Most of 'em bugs can't bite through my skin anyway. Haven't had to use it more than a few times, usually after a 'crawl'."

Otherwise known as jungle combat training, a.k.a "crawling around in the shit and sticks with the goddamnsunofabitchbugsandsnakes".

Veronath brightened at this. "You'd do that?" he asked, leonine tail flicking in excitement.

"Fuck yeah." Balus replied with a greedy grin, slipping the can from his pocket and handing it over. "After all, you're the one buying the beer."



The wood of the bar was cool under Veronath's cheek, the side of his beak resting next to his beer. Most of his drinking had been discrete martinis in the upscale bars a surgeon's practice can afford. Now here, hiding from a setting sun in a small hotel's bar and surrounded by

soldiers, he was definitely feeling like a lightweight. The oppressive heat inside, the smell of piss and Vietnamese beer pervading the room, and up above him the ceiling fan barely spun. Like every goddamn one in this country, he thought.

It made him smirk to think of Viet Cong hiding out in the factories that made them, chortling in glee as they ensured no fan shipped to the south would ever, ever do one damn iota of good. And Balus...was roaring drunk. Literally. Sitting beside him at the bar, shouting to be heard over the noise in his head, having downed 12 glasses of beer so far. Which made sense, in its own perverse way. A body like that probably needed a liver to match, and Balus had the expert balance on the barstool of a man well familiar with his drink.

The beer was sour tasting and metallic, but the gryphon sipped it anyway, feeling it bubble down his throat. Fuck, it almost wasn't worth it, he thought. A lot of beer to pay for, likely for a man who was going to be too drunk to put out even if he was interested, and he had the sinking suspicion that a bull this red-blooded would just have pussy on his mind anyway. Irritation bubbled up inside him, realizing that as much as it rankled, it just turned him on all the more. Maybe, he thought, I'll wake him up to a blowjob when he finally passes out. And deal with the consequences then. His crotch throbbed in sympathy.

Balus meanwhile was carrying on, callously describing a less than savory adventure involving two Thai hookers he'd met a few months ago, and then an ensuing segue, slurred by alcohol, that ended with his commanding officer showing up to his post hopped up on some mushroom and wearing only a turban and a sock. Neither across his hips. Veronath chuckled dutifully, checked the time, and with a mental shrug, made his move.

"Come on Balus...it's past nine-thirty, and they're going to haul the gates on us. Let's get back in before curfew. Crash at my place if you need to...it's closer to the gates, and I've got a goddamn decent shower instead of the horse trough they stand you guys under." Which left him with two separate, warmly glowing thoughts: the sergeant in his shower, and

washing down with some of the Lysol. That last thought alone was enough to send a little shiver of pleasure through him.

Balus hauled himself from the bar slowly, only slightly staggered by the amount he drank, and grinned. "Yeah...yer a good pal. Surgeon General Veronath! Patches the old boys like me up, and saves us from our sins." he rumbled with a bray of laughter.

Veronath slid some money to the bartender, overpaying a fair bit, and couldn't help but smile back to him. "My pleasure, Balus."



They stopped along the way in front of the mobile artillery supply barracks, and the sergeant jogged in with a rumbled "Just gimme a moment Vero, gotta pick somethin' up for tomorrow."

He came back with a few large velcro straps looped over a shoulder, usually used to lash gear to the side of tanks and helmets. They moved on, Veronath guiding the drunken sergeant across the base and into his home. It was one of the nicer cabins; being a surgeon on base gave some nice perks, and a small bungalow brick shack with its own bedroom, shower, and kitchen went a long way.

Veronath shut the door and flicked on the light, gesturing to the shower. "Here, go ahead and take it first, I'll tidy up a bit." Balus took a slow look around, nodded, and stumbled for the bathroom, shutting the door. The piss that ensued was best described as epic, to the point where Veronath had to glance up from his tidying and try not to laugh out loud. Twelve beers in a single go. Christ, what kind of guy was this bull that he'd do that to himself? Hopefully the kind that likes to wake up hung over and cock-sucked, he reminded himself with a sigh. Things weren't going to happen tonight, he was sure, and more than likely tomorrow would just earn him at best an ashamed ex-buddy, and at worst a dishonorable discharge. Fuck fuck fuck. Funny, he reflected, how sometimes even knowing the outcome of a choice, we still have to make it.

The shower started up inside the bathroom, and Veronath fidgeted, trying and failing not

to imagine wet hands and soap lathering that incredible body, the weightlifter-like chest and back rippling, those balls being leisurely washed...He immediately squirmed, ran to his counter, and poured a shaking finger of gin, then made it a double, and tossed it back, gritting his beak against the burn at the back of his throat. The water shut off a few minutes later, and Balus came out with his clothes draped over one arm, the towel slung casually around his hips. "All yours," he rumbled, jerking a thumb to the shower.

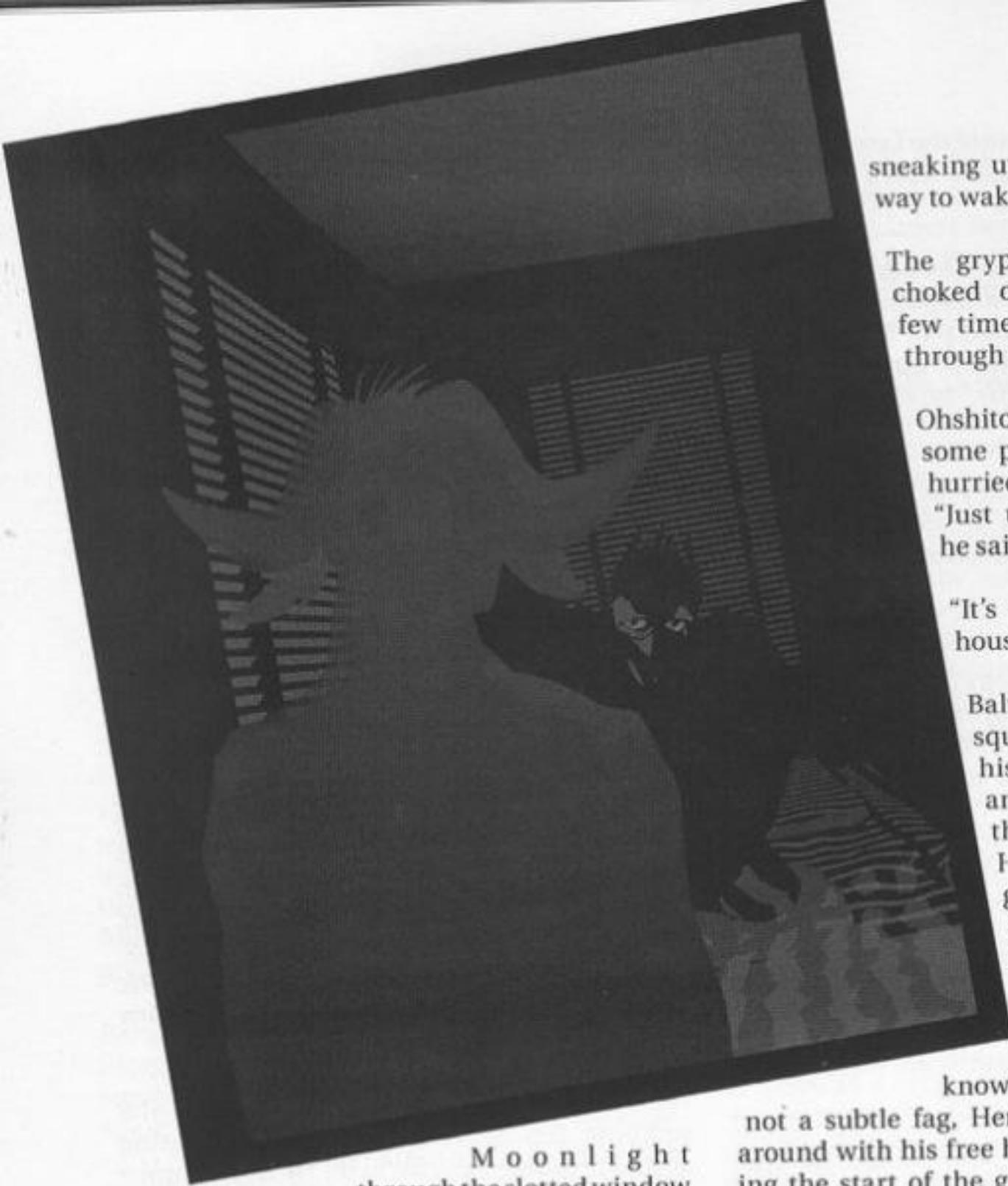
The gryphon practically shook as he stripped himself in the bathroom, tempted for a moment to leave the door open, but finally quailing at such an out of character notion for the closeted surgeon he was. The cold water of the shower was a relief after the night's heat, and he relaxed under it for a few minutes before the anticipation and excitement began to build in him once again. "God fucking dammit," he muttered softly to himself. "I need to get /fucked/." Jerking off in the shower was tempting, but not with the thoughts of the sergeant outside his door, in that too-small towel. Temptation leads us all, he ruefully mulled, as he started to wash down. The tin of lice-agent was definitely worth any amount of aggravation, though.

For fifteen full minutes he luxuriated in the soothing feel of cool water and de-lousing agent spreading over his skin. He nearly broke into song before remembering that Balus was in the next room; instead he allowed himself a victorious grin as one by one tiny black specks leapt off him to be swept to their doom down the drain.

Take that, Vietnam.



He hit the faucet a few minutes later and reached for a towel to dry off. His hand grasped empty air. Shit. Used to living alone, he only ever hung one towel up, and Balus had taken it, probably too drunk to notice the empty towel rack left in his wake. Veronath cursed softly and stepped out into the room. The house was dark and quiet, the soft sound of snoring coming up from the bedroom. He walked in, his steps quiet as a whisper.



Moonlight through the slotted window traced ebony bulges and inky curves, throwing the water buffalo's massive chest into harsh visual relief. Balus was sprawled across the bed, wearing nothing but dogtags, boots, and the towel over the bulge of his crotch. Veronath caught his breath at the sight and, compelled, his hand reached out slowly for that towel. Trying not to breathe, trying to quiet the rushing of blood in his ears. Wanting to dry off, but more than anything, wanting to see what was hidden under the towel. To see it, to touch it, smell it, taste it, feel it, with every fiber of his being.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Balus' low voice sent his heart up into his throat, and the gryphon's wings almost launched him into the ceiling. The sergeant's eyes were open, watching him. A soldier's instincts will let him sleep through artillery bombardment, but

sneaking up on one is the surest way to wake him.

The gryphon stammered and choked on his own tongue a few times, a shudder running through his body.

Ohshitohshitohshit, yammered some part of his mind, as he hurriedly dropped his hand. "Just uh...needed the towel," he said, flustered.

"It's the only one in the house," he finished lamely.

Balus' hand caught him square across the back of his neck, clutching him and pulling him down as the water buffalo sat up. He smirked down to the gryphon, his meaty hand holding around the back of his head, the feathers caught between his fingers. "Bull. Fucking. Shit." he rumbled

knowingly, chuckling. "You're not a subtle fag, Herr doktor..." he gestured around with his free hand to the home, ignoring the start of the gryphon's struggling. His other hand held him like an iron grip: not tight, but implacable. Even throwing his full weight against the arm, Veronath couldn't move it, and he started to tremble, wondering if he was going to suffer a beating now, yet unable to ignore how close he was to that towel, and the bulge underneath. The thick smell of the bull's balls was in the air, and fear and desire warred through him as the sergeant continued, "...you liquor me up, you watch me in the shower back at medical, and you take me back here. There's only one bed, and you know it." In fact, Veronath had forgotten that detail, but decided he'd probably have ignored it even if he'd remembered. He whimpered as the free hand slowly coiled into a fist the size of a small ham.

Balus smirked down to him, the broad, bovine muzzle parting in an ugly grin. "But hey, that's okay. You patched me up, I figure I owe you a little something in return. How'd you like to

suck some cock, bitch? Yeah, you fags fucking like that. And taking it up the ass." His tone of voice was not a pleasant one, making Veronath struggle all the harder in his hands. Calmly, Balus raised his fist, opened his hand, and then casually brought it down across the gryphon's beak. The hollow "THWOCK!" of meaty hand dropping on beak echoed throughout the room, while the surgeon's eyes crossed and lost focus. Balus stood, letting the gryphon slump half-bonelessly to the floor. The strike had had no power to it, but gravity and mass had been enough to stun. "You goddamn ass bitches are all the same..." he muttered, reaching over to his clothes lying on one side of the bed and taking out the velcro straps from a pocket. "All think you're so fucking smart, all think a straight boy can't tell when you're checking out his ass. I'm going to teach you a lesson, you little shit."

The gryphon struggled weakly on the floor as massive hands grabbed his wrists, forcing them behind his back. A few quick wraps of the nylon-backed velcro bound his arms together helplessly. The straps had been designed to tensile strength in the thousands of pounds, and although Veronath knew it was useless, he broke into tears and struggled vainly. Suddenly this date had gone very, very wrong. His wet plumage dripped onto the floor as the water buffalo kicked his feet up, bound them behind his knees, and then looped both sets of restraints together.

"Please...d-don't..." he started to say, before another casual slap across the back of his head made him startle and yelp. Effortlessly, and all without bothering to even stand up, Balus yanked him back upright, and without preamble shoved Veronath's head under the towel, to his waiting cock.

"If I so much as feel your beak..." the voice above him growled, "...I'll fucking string you up outside and let the generals send you back home in a gimp suit."

Thick cock, unseen, but smelled and tasted, was suddenly forced into his mouth. The gryphon sent up a mental prayer as his throat closed around it. Bigger than any cock he'd ever sucked before...and with a jolt of horror, he realized the sergeant wasn't even hard yet. Even with his jaws as wide as he could open them,

he gagged against the girth forced down his throat, the rough hand on the back of his head forcing him to swallow it. Tears began to trail down his beak. He'd wanted to do this...but not like this, humiliated, taunted, shaft crammed into his gullet, throat muscles clamping down.

Balus smirked down at him. "Yeah, you little fucking slut. I knew I had what you wanted. Swallow that cock. Makes you real happy, don't it? You're going to suck my cock until I'm satisfied. And you know what, Vero?" He grinned down to the bobbing form of the sobbing gryphon, lightly tossing away the towel to watch the tears roll down the gagging beak. "It's going to take you *hours*..."

Veronath couldn't decide if the thrill that ran through him was fear or pleasure.



The salty cock in his gullet started to thrust against him, making Veronath gag all the more. His knees ached, his wrists and head ached where he'd been roughly handled, and Balus was forcing him to work at whatever pace he wanted.

Sobs of frustration wracked him now, his own cock ignored and aching stiff, aroused despite himself. He'd been swallowing the bull's cock greedily for well over an hour. Sometime during that Balus had wrenched his tail up high and pushed him onto the bed, slowly fucking the gryphon's muzzle with that impossibly large shaft. Resting on his chin and knees, his upturned tail was too inviting for Balus to ignore. The first two fingers had made him scream and writhe helplessly, as they pumped into his ass in time with the thrusts of buffalo cock, each finger easily the match for any normal man's three.

His ass hurt, his throat hurt, and he must have swallowed a liter of precum by now. The bull's shaft in his maw drizzled constantly, but still refused to cum. Balus' balls swung slowly in the air, bumping into the bottom of Veronath's beak now and then, while Balus groaned and kept up a constant tirade of abuse: "You little fucking ass whore...just love to taste that dick, don't you? Fucking fag with his tail up in the air, wanting it so bad in the ass. You like those

fingers, don't you? Makes you want more, huh? Well too damn bad." A harsh slap of Veronath's ass with Balus' free hand made him yelp and his cock throb between his legs. The ache of his balls was an entirely different one, the small puddle of precum across the bed at least an hour in the making.

Screams of frustration were mounting in him as Balus, for easily the twentieth time, started to fuck his gullet hard again, then hilted and forced himself to wait for his excitement to diminish. Balus repeatedly brought himself up to the point just before climax, then eased down again, using the gryphon in this brutal, slow manner. His fingers were buried in the gryphon's ass, grinding down against his prostate now and then, just as expertly keeping the gryphon hanging on edge. Sweat dripped from his muzzle here and there onto the blue plumage. Veronath's weak writhing did nothing against the velcro straps binding him. He could barely breathe when the bull hilted himself yet again, shuddered slowly, and held the gryphon's head in close, thighs like tree-trunks pressing against the side of his face. Oh god, please let him cum, and please let me not choke to death, Veronath begged silently, his sobbing having worked itself so deep that cramps were working through his chest and abdomen.

Instead, Balus slipped his hand out of the gryphon's ass, gave him another sharp slap across his firm, feathered rump, and then slid the gryphon off the bed to stand, towering over him, clutching Veronath's head. He looked down at the gryphon and smirked. "Put yourself to work. You pull off before I'm done cumming, and I'll put this fist up your ass next, you unnerstand me, faggot?" he growled down.

Veronath nodded as best he could, then started bobbing his head weakly, unable to do much more with arms and legs bound. Balus folded his arms and watched him, one boot tapping the floor for a few moments until the gryphon finally hit a reasonable pace. Sobs of despair mingled with desire escaped around the bulls' broad cock as the gryphon guzzled the salty-sweet cream. More precum poured down his throat as Balus' balls slowly rose between his thighs and the sergeant's eyes narrowed.

The smell of sex filled Veronath's nostrils, his own frustrated arousal mingling with the scent of bovine cock and precum. Despite the ache his entire body suffered, he strained against his bonds for a moment or two. Still useless. He was in the bull's power, and so he bobbed his head faster, warring between resentment and arousal as he sucked the thick shaft back into his throat as far as he could manage. His eyes glared up at the bull, and he almost risked biting the cock in his mouth, if only to get that smug look out of the bull's eyes, if only to show he wasn't entirely obedient. But fear and hunger warred, and hunger won, and his tongue darted out under the shaft to stroke the heavy balls as best he could, deep-throating the cocktip hard. He was rewarded by a bellow of pleasure, and the sudden throb of Balus' cock in his throat, as the bull finally let himself be brought over the edge.

Heavy hands fell around his head, holding his beak against the pulsing crotch of the water buffalo. "Mmrnrfg!" he essayed, and then nearly choked as the flood of semen filled his throat. More snorts and grunts came from Balus' muzzle as he humped into Veronath's throat hard, head thrown back, entire body tensing and pulsing. It seemed to Veronath that a minute must have passed before the thrusting let up.

The gryphon groaned around the cock in his beak. His own neglected shaft gave a small spurt of pre-cum in its excitement. One touch, he was sure, would send him over the edge. Just one touch, and he'd cum all over himself like he was fourteen again, out of control. But Balus didn't move; he just looked down at the helpless gryphon and smirked, his voice murmuring softly now in the afterglow of his climax. "That's a good little dicksucker. Like that, little birdy? Aww, you crying still? Guess I didn't do it right." That ugly grin broke across his lips again, a hand tauntingly, or tenderly, stroking the tears off of Veronath's beak. Hard to say which.

His next words, however, left no doubt: "Guess we'll just have to go all over again. I don't recall saying you could *stop*, bitch."

A low moan rose from the doctor's throat. Definitely despair and lust both, this time.



The moon had gone down, the sun had started to rise, and sometime into the third hour of throat-fucking, Veronath had lost his mind. Which isn't to say he went insane, though some clinical part of him might have explored the option, but rather he misplaced it amidst the screaming agony of joints too long immobile, and the impossible lust for the bull that was, for the fourth time, about to cum in his throat.

Sweat trickled down over his face, the beaded glints of sunlight over the blue-black body pumping above him. He wanted with every fiber of his being to rise up and lick those spots of sweat from that impossibly well-built body, stacked muscle rippling as the cock continued to abuse his ravaged throat. He was hoarse, his esophagus hurt like hell, and the cum in his gut was the only thing sparing him from dehydration by now, he was sure.

Balus bellowed again, snarling softly down to the helplessly bound gryphon, and came again, another two good gushes of cum pouring down the gryphon's throat. Veronath hardly noticed, except to swallow faster, tongue lashing at the cock. His sobs had dried up with his sanity, and he silently accepted this gift from what his mind had started to accept as Master.

The cock, when he finally had a chance to see it pulled from his gullet, was enormous: fourteen inches of gleaming black water buffalo. Balus flopped back down on the bed, lathered in sweat, a last rope of his cum trailing off the tip of his cock onto the gryphon's beak. The room stank of sweat and sex, dust motes gleaming in the air under the listlessly turning ceiling fan.

The cum in the gryphon's mouth tasted like grass stems.

Balus smirked down over his chiseled body, still wearing his combat boots, all casual American arrogance as he studied the bound gryphon at the foot of the bed. His blue plumage

was matted in dirt and sweat, and a good bit of cum, and his beak was still emitting a faint whimper into the air. The buffalo fiddled with his dog tags over his broad, black chest, admiring the reflection of the tin on the droplets of sweat still plastered to his chest. Morning was here, and with it, the cabin had started to heat up. The gryphon's cock was still standing stiff, nearly purple now.

Desperate eyes begged him, and to his surprise Balus felt more stirring in his loins. This caused him to grin to himself again. Four hours he'd kept that little bitch waiting. Oh well. A lesson to be learned: Vietnam was hell.

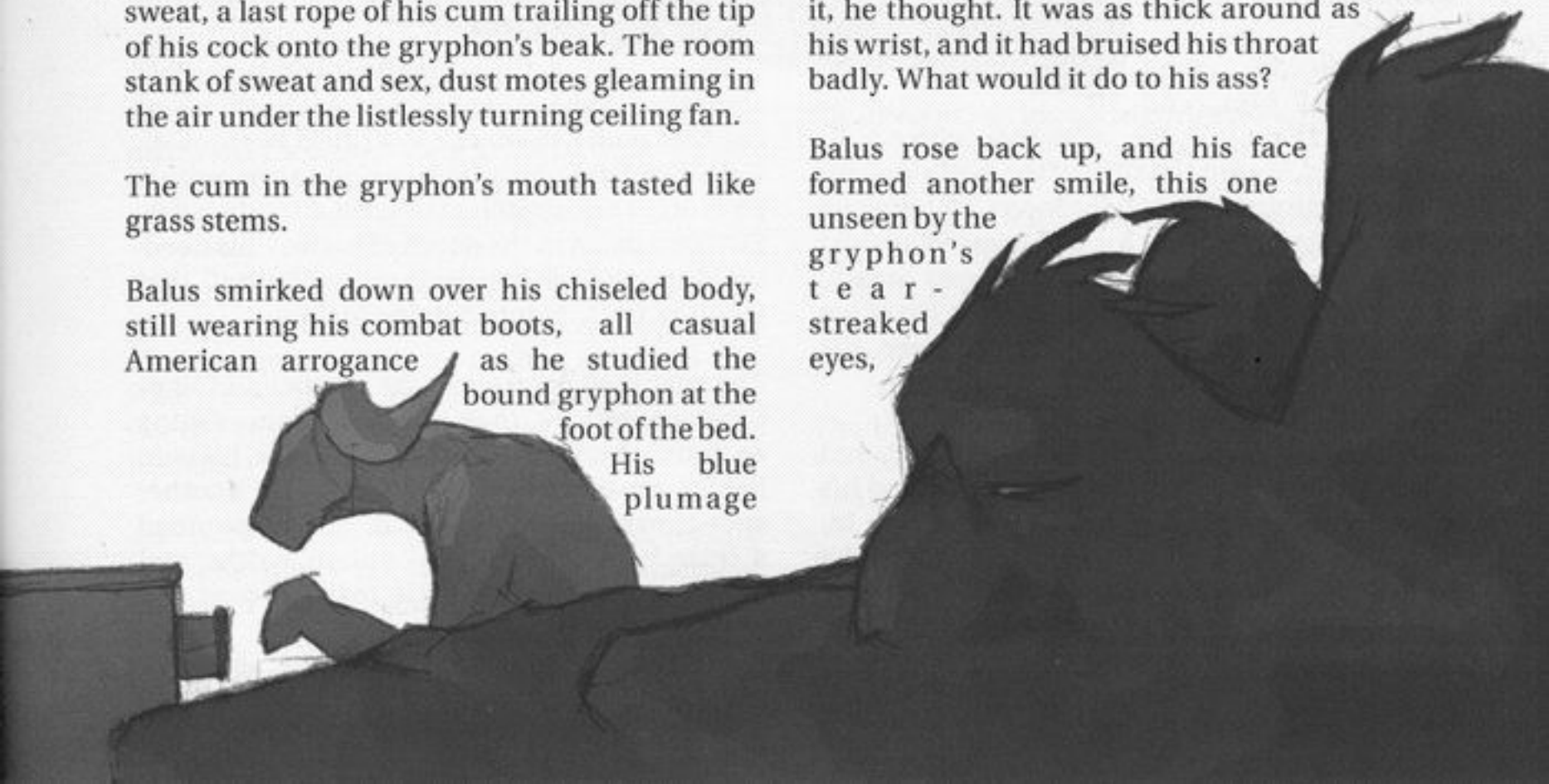
He glanced down idly at the gryphon panting in silence at his place at the foot of the bed, eyes silently pleading and occasionally darting toward that massive, gleaming spire of ebony cock. Balus' voice broke the silence, his exhaled breath making gleaming dust motes swirl around his muzzle.

"You still want to get fucked, Vero?"

His voice was soft, contemplative now, and a touch condescending.

The gryphon meant to reply with a nod, but raspy words spilled from his beak unbidden, rattling hollowly in his throat. "P-please...oh god I need to cum so bad fuck me...w-wide open...god a cock of that size!" He broke into tears again, afraid, aroused, imagining that monster pushing its way into him. No way could he take it, he thought. It was as thick around as his wrist, and it had bruised his throat badly. What would it do to his ass?

Balus rose back up, and his face formed another smile, this one unseen by the gryphon's tear-streaked eyes,



a much more concerned, gentler expression. The broad hand gently brushed the gryphon's face where he'd slapped him earlier, making Veronath flinch for a moment, then feeling it for the caress it was, break into a fresh round of sobs in pathetic gratitude, utterly broken now.

The water buffalo's strong arms lifted him onto the bed, placing him belly down. A pillow interrupted the gryphon's sobs as it was pushed into his beak; gratefully he bit down on it and closed his eyes, trembling, waiting.

The sound of drawers being opened came, twice, three times, before Balus found the lube Veronath kept by the bed stand. Wet spluttering sounds followed. Veronath screwed his eyes ever more tightly shut, breaths coming in quick, excited pants, and he hiked his tail over as high as it would allow in anticipation.

Balus slowly came up behind him, and grabbed that tail by the base with a still-lubed hand. He felt the shift of the bull's weight, his legs stepping through the loops left between knee and wrist, leaving his feet pressed against the washboard of his stomach. "Deep breath, lad." He murmured, and then slid the tip of his cock, easily three inches wide, between the gryphon's feathered buttocks.

Veronath's cock gave an immediate jerk and dribble of precum as the cold lube touched his pucker, and then meaty hands pulled him in, the bull's cock slowly pushing him open. The pillow only partially muffled the scream that rent his sore throat even further, and more

tears streamed from his beak. He thrashed and bucked helplessly, sure he would rip around the hot, insistent pressure.

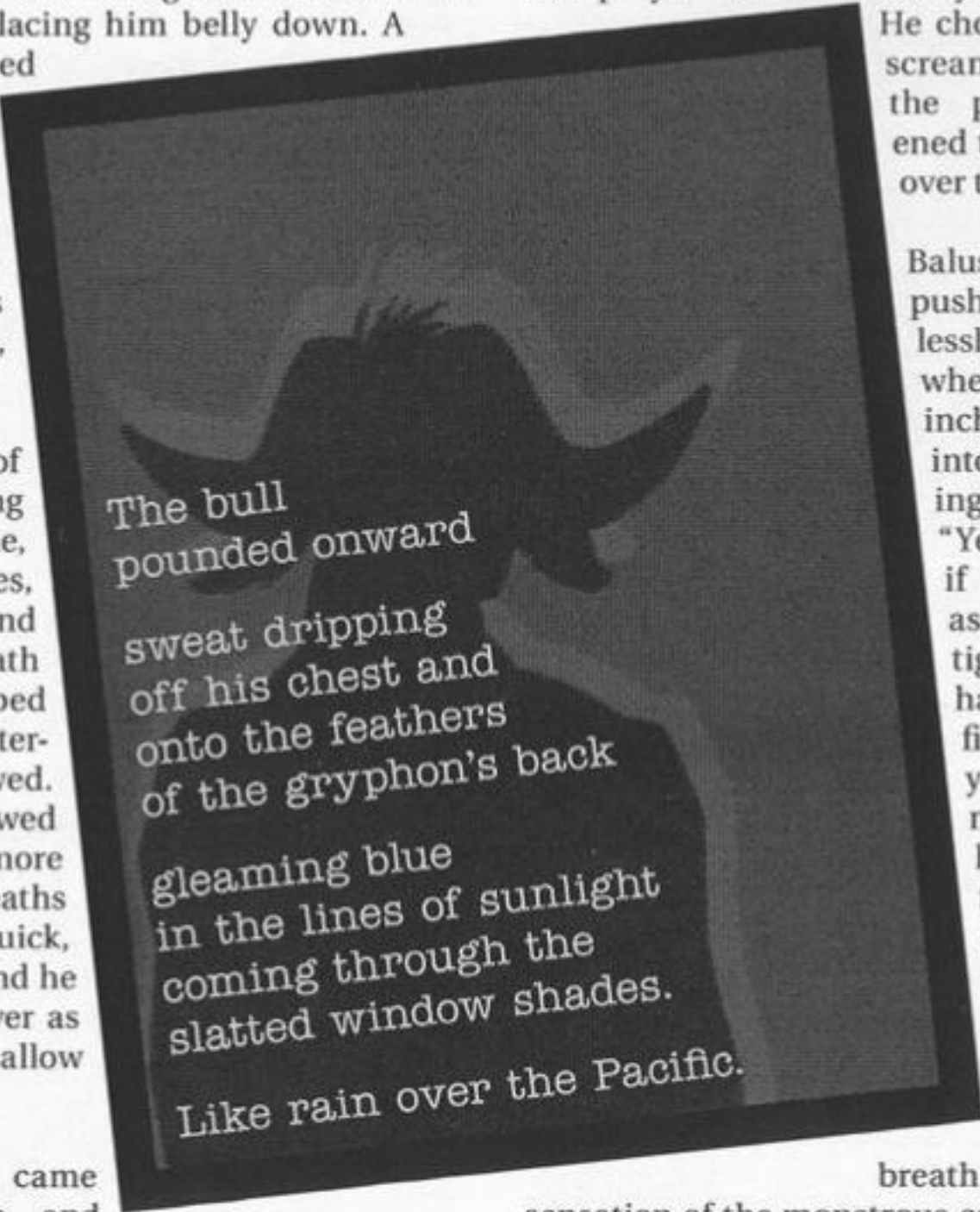
Balus groaned atop the bound gryphon, forcing himself slowly in. Veronath couldn't help but clench down, trying to force the cock out, wordless prayers of mercy lashing his mind. He choked on his own screams, however, as the pleasure threatened to finally set him over the edge.

Balus chuckled and pushed forward recklessly, finally stopping when he'd put eight inches of thick cock into the whimpering gryphon's ass. "Yeah...ung-fuck... if I'd known your ass was so fucking tight, bitch, I'd have bent you over first...oooh fuck yes..." he murmured, raising a hand to slap the feathered ass sharply, barely eliciting a yelp from Veronath. The gryphon was too busy gasping for

breath at the incredible

sensation of the monstrous cock, slowly opening him wider than any lover he'd ever taken. Even the ache of his body paled to the aching pain of his ass, stretched beyond all endurance. But both paled in the depth of his lust, his need, nodding and whimpering up to the bull that was turning him into a living fucktoy.

The spanking continued, the meaty hand slapping one buttock, then the other, Balus timing each smack with the thrusts of his hips, his own lustful groans rising in him. He did another spot-check; good, no blood, so he pumped a little harder, making Veronath writhe and moan underneath him. He reached over and



The bull
pounded onward
sweat dripping
off his chest and
onto the feathers
of the gryphon's back
gleaming blue
in the lines of sunlight
coming through the
slatted window shades.
Like rain over the Pacific.

pulled the pillow out, and to his surprise words came pouring from Veronath's mouth again.

"Oh god Balus please...ungh! No, no more...gods yes, don't stop, fuck me harder, no...it hurts...oh Jesus fucking hell more...nooo!" the gryphon babbled insensibly, trying to somehow thrust back against the cock impaling him, unable to with his hands and ankles still hogtied behind his back. He yelped with each slap on his ass, the small sting only driving him onward. He wanted nothing more at this point than to feel Balus cum in him, wanted nothing more than the pain to stop.

The bull pounded onward, sweat dripping off his chest and onto the feathers of the gryphon's back, gleaming blue in the lines of sunlight coming through the slatted window shades. Like rain over the Pacific, some part of him noted.

He arched his hips and pulled out nearly to the tip, before hilding himself slowly, feeding Veronath's hips all fourteen inches of cock, slowly near the end. He gave a last slap of the gryphon's ass, then slid his broad hand underneath Veronath's hips, and started pumping his cock.

Veronath, in return, screamed and babbled, begging for mercy and more in the same breath as he came thunderously, feeling for a moment as though his entire body was forcing itself out through his prick, another explosive spray of semen splashing immediately against Balus' broad hand and onto his belly. The bull snorted atop him and growled in pleasure. "Little faggot birdy likes that, does he? Mmn, makes his ass so...fuckin'...tight!" Three more sharp thrusts made his fat balls swing and slap against the gryphon's testicles, making them both groan aloud at once, and then Balus came.

The gryphon shook his head and screamed in pleasure, sobbing and choking, as the pulsing of cock against prostate pushed him over the edge a once more, a weak dribble of cum joining the veritable lake that was forming under his belly.

The water buffalo snorted and huffed, feeling his balls empty the last of their considerable load into the screaming gryphon, and then

pulled out, letting the last of his pearly semen splash over the gryphon's ass and tail. "Good little faggot..." he murmured, and with a few efficient jerks of his wrists, opened the velcro around Veronath's ankles and hands, tossing it aside.

Veronath lay there for minutes, before his arms finally obeyed the order to lower, his knees moving stiffly, biting off another scream of pain as limbs held far too long immobile were finally allowed to move. Too weak to turn over or cover himself, he just lay there, panting, listening to the sound of Balus moving around the house, turning on the coffee maker, and starting up the shower.

He must have fallen asleep for a moment or two, because he wasn't aware of Balus' arms around him until he'd been carried into the shower. The lukewarm water was a welcome shock, and briefly he opened his beak to drink from the flat, tepid stream. Around this time it registered that he was against the sergeant's chest, clutched there by the strong hands stroking his back. The kindness, after so much abuse throughout the night, was too much; yet again he sobbed, long, wracking howls of a child, feeling the cool water soak and soothe him.

He barely registered being washed, though about mid-way through he shakily took up the cloth and started to stroke the sexy, muscled chest he was pressed against.

"You alright now?" came Balus' voice, deep and soft, over the sound of the shower.

"Yeah," came Veronath's quiet reply. "Why...?" the question dying off in confusion. Why did he care? Why was he being cradled now, washed? Was the sergeant trying to avoid him pressing rape charges? Fat chance of him going through with that. Dishonorable discharge would lose him his tenure at his hospital back home, and there'd be no way to fake that some part of him hadn't enjoyed it.

The hug was a gentle shock, but by this point Veronath was too numb to react to it beyond weakly embracing back.

"Because you liked it." Came the only reply, and after a moment, Veronath understood.



He'd bought the redneck act hook, line, and sinker. Balus' voice continued, softly in his ear. "I won't lie, Vero. I'm not gay. I fucked you because I knew you wanted it, and hell, I wanted it too. I knew from the moment I noticed you staring at me in the shower, that you'd be the type who'd let me do anything I wanted to you. The way you watched me, or the way you would look away. You spent more than half your time stitching me, trying not to stare at my cock. You needed me." A soft chuckle left the broad chest, as warm fingers soothingly found the gryphon's wing-bases, and massaged there, making Veronath arch and moan.

Balus continued: "I'm into women. But your desperation was pretty hot, and truth is, I haven't had a good fuck in at least two months."

He smiled and stroked Veronath's wing muscles, hearing the soft cooing moans of the gryphon in his arms. "And to be honest, doctor, you were one hell of a good fuck. So I'll break you a deal: You call me back here the next time you need it so bad, and next time I'll fuck your ass like I fucked your mouth."

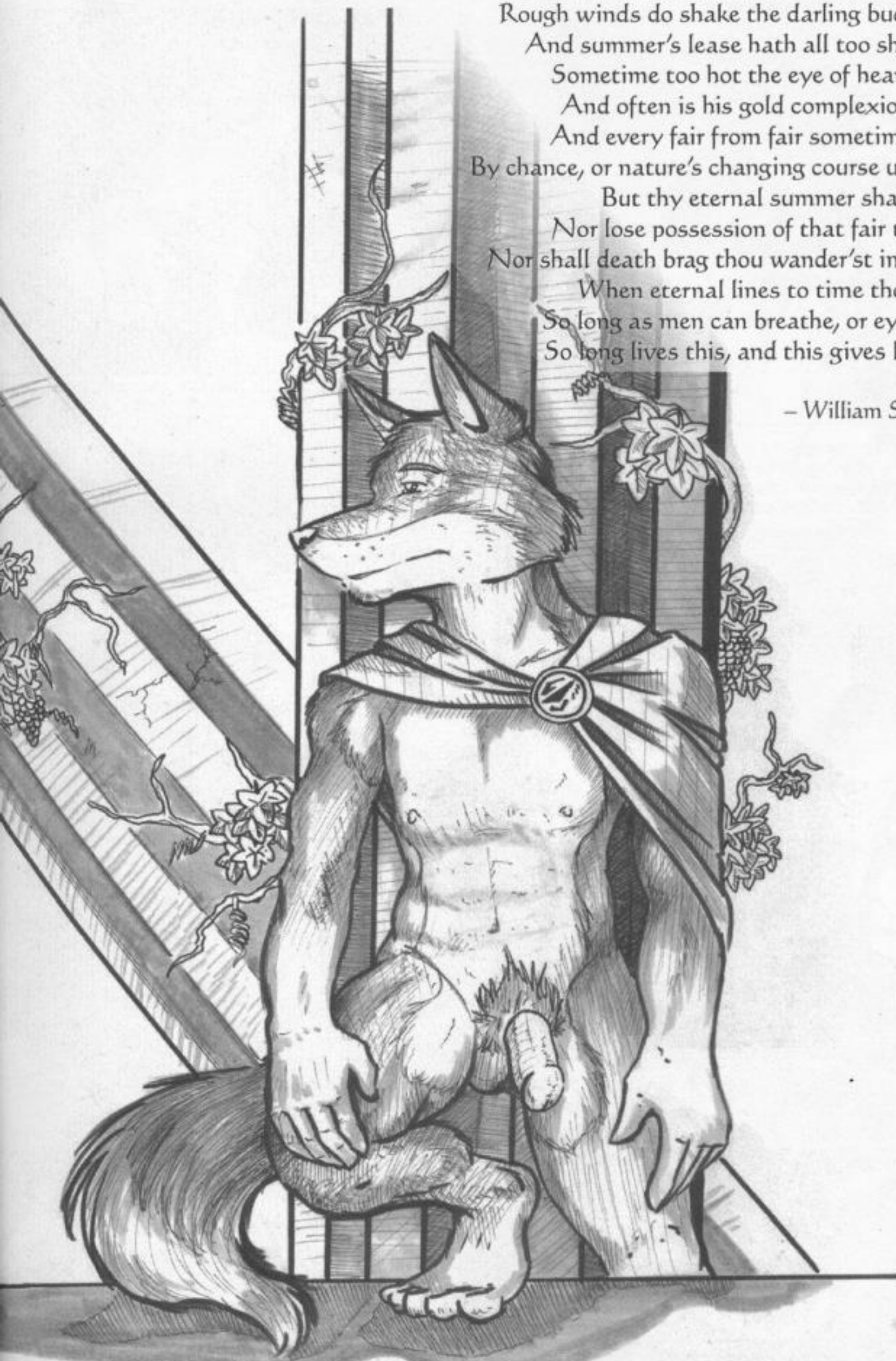
The gryphon stared at him in dull shock for a long moment. Rolling the memories over in his mind, and realizing he was savoring them. And now, the warmth of the bull's voice, the strong arms around him. Supporting him, protecting him, cradling him. Safe.

"It's a date, you asshole." Veronath giggled finally, as the smell of coffee brewing mingled with the smell of lathered bull around him.



Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

— William Shakespeare



Lapping the Competition


Story & Illustration by Adam Wan

Revisions by Brer Foxxe and Alopex



⇒ CLICK! ⇐





HEY JET! I SAW THAT SPOTTYDOG FAG EYEING YOUR ASS AGAIN.

DOES HE MAKE YOU JEALOUS, GIL?

I THINK SPOTTY WAS EYEIN' **BRYANT**. HE'S THE ONE WITH THE DAINTY ASS.

REALLY FUNNY GUYS.

WHERE DO YOU GO AFTER PRACTICE, BRYANT? OFF CHASING THAT FAIRY?

THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN WHISTLING AT BITCHES.

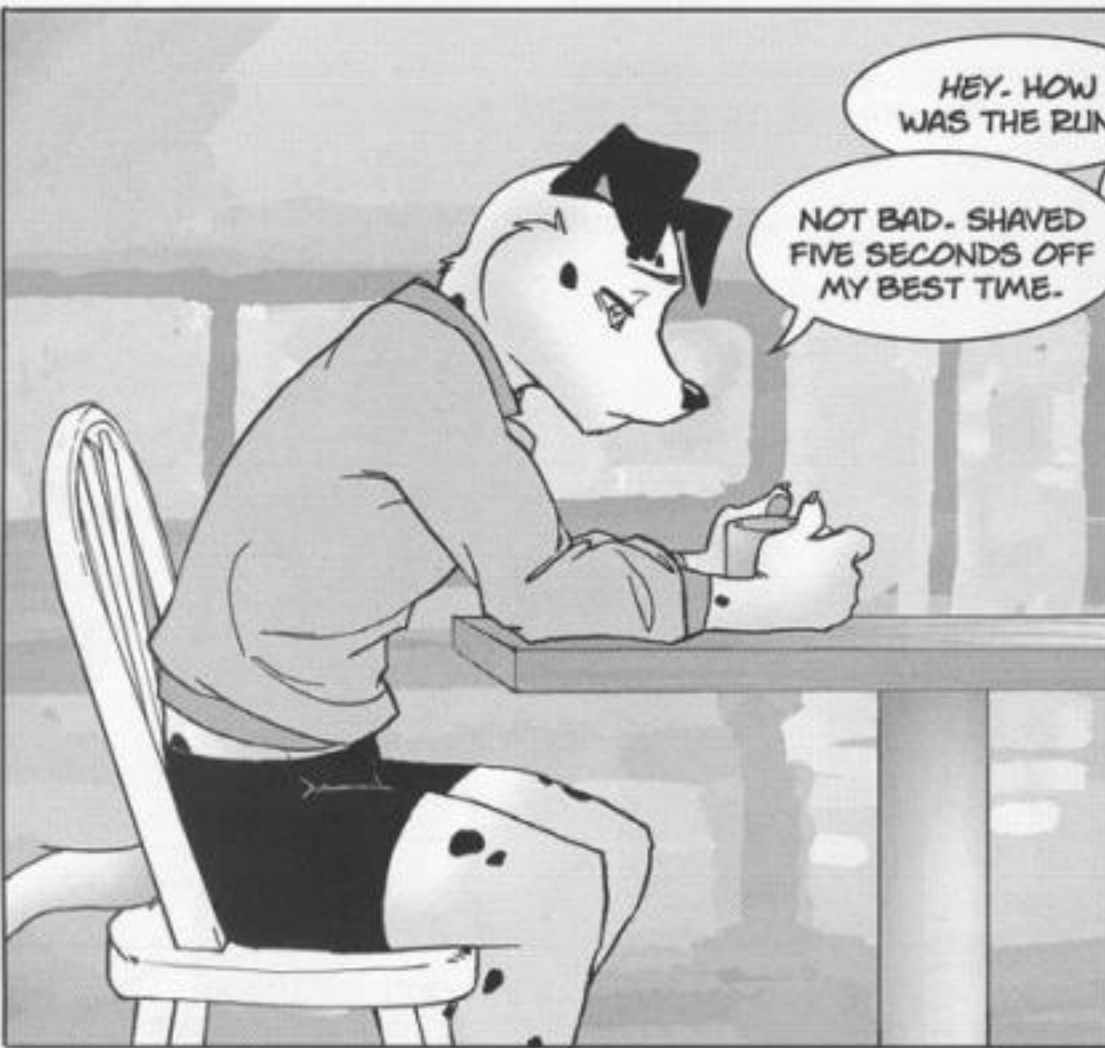
WHY DON'T YOU TAKE IT UP WITH **COACH O'REILLY**? I KNOW HE'D BE HAPPY TO ADDRESS YOUR AGGRESSION PROBLEMS AGAIN.

WE COULD REALLY USE THE WARM BENCHES.

WHO KNOWS, YOU MIGHT EVEN GET A SLICE OF PIE FOR YOURSELF, IF YOU WEREN'T ALWAYS JERKING OFF WITH THE GUYS.

GRUMBLE

NEXT TIME WE CATCH SPOTTY EYEIN' US, WE'RE USING 'EM FOR TACKLE PRACTICE.



HEY. HOW WAS THE RUN?

NOT BAD. SHAVED FIVE SECONDS OFF MY BEST TIME.

THAT'S GREAT! YOU DON'T MIND IF I SIT HERE DO YOU?

BE MY GUEST.



I'M SORRY ABOUT EARLIER. THINGS HAVE BEEN CHANGING WITH ME AND THE GUYS ON THE TEAM, THEY'RE NOT THE SAME GUYS I KNEW WHEN I JOINED A FEW MONTH...



PAUSE



SOMETHING WRONG, SWEETHEART?



SAY, WHY DON'T WE GET OUR TAILS BACK TO THE HOUSE? I BET ALIESTER'S COOKING SOMETHING REALLY TASTY FOR TONIGHT'S DINNER!

SOUNDS GOOD TO ME. BUT REMEMBER, YOU PROMISED WE'D GET A CHANCE TO TALK ABOUT THIS.

DON'T WORRY, I JUST NEED A LITTLE MORE TIME TO THINK ABOUT IT.

ALRIGHT, BUT DON'T THINK I WON'T HOLD YOU TO IT.



HEY GUYS! HOW'D
PRACTICE GO?

MY RUN WENT
GREAT! I MANAGED TO
SHAVE OFF FIVE WHOLE
SECONDS!

MINE
WENT FINE,
I GUESS.

AT THIS RATE,
I SHOULD BE ABLE TO
MAKE VARSITY BY
SPRING!

ALL
RIGHT! GREAT
JOB, HON!



EEP!

DING!

BRYANT DEAR,
YOU WOULDN'T MIND
IF I BORROWED OWEN
FOR HELP AROUND THE
KITCHEN, WOULD
YOU?

YOU DON'T
NEED ANY HELP
FROM ME?

I THINK IT'S SAFE
TO ASSUME YOU DON'T
WANT ME AROUND FOR
KITCHEN DUTY...

YOU'RE
RIGHT, JAKE
WON'T BE
ARRIVING FOR
A FEW MORE
HOURS.

SO GO AHEAD
AND TELL ME WHAT'S
GOING ON BETWEEN
YOU TWO.

DON'T YOU
HAVE AN EXAM TO
BE STUDYING FOR?
SHOO, SHOO!



IT'S A LOT OF THINGS, ACTUALLY. I'M WORRIED ABOUT HIM, HOW HE SPENDS SO MUCH TIME IN THE LOCKER ROOMS AFTER PRACTICE... EVEN TODAY, WHEN I WAVED TO HIM FROM THE TRACK, HE TURNED AWAY, LIKE HE WAS TRYING TO IGNORE ME.



MAYBE YOU WERE **DISTRACTING** HIM? I'D BELIEVE THAT, I MEAN JUST LOOK AT YOURSELF IN THOSE TIGHT LITTLE RUNNING SHORTS!

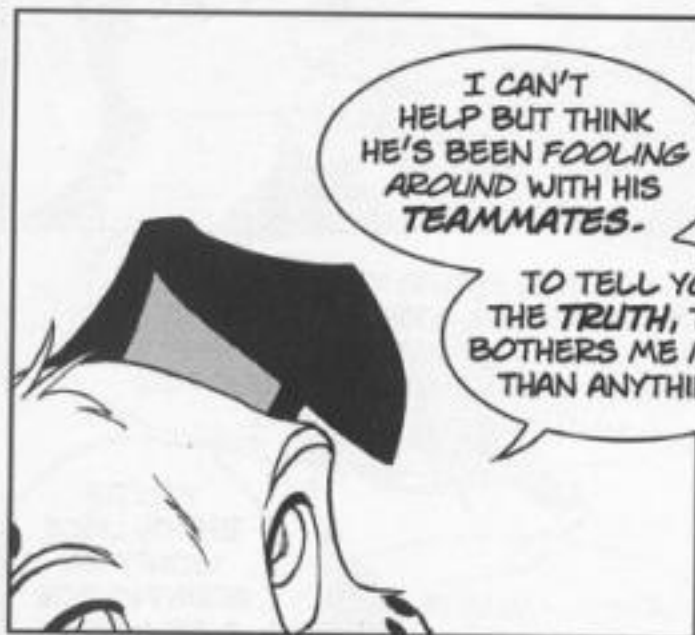
YOU'RE NOT HELPING ONE BIT!

SORRY, I COULDN'T RESIST!



I CAN'T HELP BUT THINK HE'S BEEN **FOOLING** AROUND WITH HIS **TEAMMATES**.

TO TELL YOU THE **TRUTH**, THAT BOTHERS ME MORE THAN ANYTHING.



I DON'T THINK IT'S FAIR TO ASSUME HE'S BEEN **UNFAITHFUL**, ON THE GROUNDS THAT HE'S REGULARLY IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHER MEN.



THIS DOESN'T SOUND LIKE SOMETHING YOU SHOULD BE TALKING WITH ME ABOUT.

DINNER WON'T BE FOR A LITTLE WHILE; WHY NOT GO HAVE A LITTLE TALK WITH BRYANT AND GET SOME **ANSWERS** TO YOUR QUESTIONS.

ALRIGHT, FAIR ENOUGH.



HI JAKE,
YOU'RE HOME
EARLY!

NOT A WHOLE
LOT HAPPENIN' AT THE
CAR LOT, SO I TOOK THE
REST OF THE DAY OFF.

DON'T TELL ME
I MISSED ALL THE
FUN AGAIN!

GIGGLE
NO, I JUST NEED
TO GO TALK TO BRYANT
ABOUT A FEW THINGS
BEFORE THE FOOD'S
READY.



TAKE YOUR TIME
HON, LOOKS LIKE DINNER
IS STILL ON TRACK FOR A
LATE ARRIVAL.

MY, AREN'T WE A
LITTLE **OVERDRESSED**
THIS EVENING?

NOTHING A **DINGO**
LIKE MYSELF COULDN'T
FIX IN A JIFFY.

YOU CAN BE SO
PREDICTABLE WHEN
YOU'RE **HORNY**.

IS THAT SO?

GOODNESS!!

I DO HOPE
YOU'LL BE WASHING
YOUR HANDS BEFORE
SUPPER!



KNOCK KNOCK

BRYANT? CAN I COME IN? I'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT A FEW THINGS WITH YOU...

SURE OWEN, COME RIGHT IN. WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO TALK ABOUT?

YOU CAN PROBABLY GUESS MOST OF IT... IT HAS TO DO WITH TODAY, AND WITH WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS. I'VE NOTICED SOME CHANGES, AND I'VE BEEN GETTING WORRIED SOMETHING MAY BE HAPPENING THAT YOU'RE NOT TELLING ME.

I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN. THERE'S BEEN A LOT ON MY MIND LATELY, BUT I THINK I'M READY TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT IT.

... SO GET THAT CUTE BUTT OVER HERE, AND OUT OF THOSE CLOTHES! TELL ME WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND.

SOME TIME LATER....

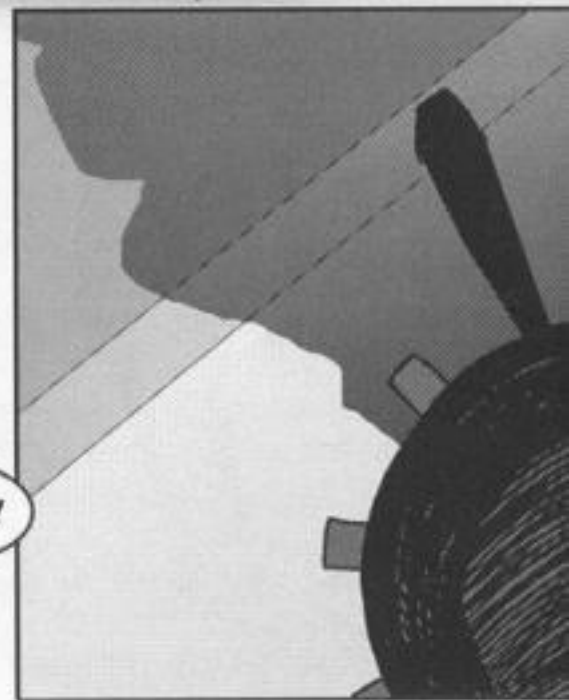
TRUTH BE TOLD, A FEW GUYS ON THE TEAM HAVE BEEN SHOWING JUST HOW HOMOPHOBIC THEY REALLY ARE, EVEN GOING AS FAR AS MAKING THREATS TOWARD YOU. THEY DON'T KNOW ABOUT US, OR THAT I'M GAY, BUT THE ISSUE IS BOUND TO COME UP ONE OF THESE DAYS. IT'S GOING TO END IN ME LEAVING THE TEAM.

I CAN EITHER HIDE MY SEXUALITY FROM THE TEAM AND HOPE THEY DON'T FIND OUT, OR I CAN QUIT WHILE I'M AHEAD. I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU, OR ANYONE GETTING HURT.

... SO I'VE JUST BEEN WORRIED THAT'S WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING, AND I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO ASK WITHOUT IT OFFENDING YOU.







Missing

by Scout McIntyger



illustrated by Eric "Bayson" Hunter

Now last night I had a strange dream. It was about a snake swallowing an apple. I think I was the snake, because the apple was very good. Just a dream about a long, emerald snake, with this big apple in the middle of him at the end.

This morning I'm in the park. Or a park. I'm not sure what it's called. I'm still lying here, half-buried under creeping vines just inside the tree line. I'm about thirty yards from where people are padding briskly back and forth to school, to work. To wherever. I'm not one of them anymore. I no longer give a shit.

Every so often one of them will catch sight of me and falter in step for a moment. Trying not to be impolite while they consider me; an apparently naked man (I am) lying half-concealed in underbrush. Am I a fauve? A drunken civic? Am I even alive, or am I last night's hastily-disposed-of murder victim? I'm alive; I keep my tail tip in sight so I can flick it every so often. People see this and move on. If I'm alive, the rest is my problem. They don't want to get involved. In a way, I guess they're like me, in spite of all the clothes and watches and civility. They don't give a shit either. So they point their noses back in the direction of wherever it is there's supposed to be when the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is wherever, and follow it there.

I stretch, breaking up the sedate monotony in my limbs, forcing life back into my extremities. I'm hungry. Really hungry. I've been ranging for about two weeks now, since I decided to leave it all behind. I've had barely a square meal in all that time. This is nothing new to me; I've lived like this before. But not for most of a decade. It's funny how fast the fleas catch

up with you. Some things you tend to forget 'till they bite you on the ass. Literally. So I stand up and scratch, working my claws into my pelt; my ribs, my shoulders, my ass, my balls. And yes, people see me, stopping on the path and gawking. Some ignore me; I think they're afraid. I'm either a wild man or insane. Neither one is good to make eye contact with. I decide to make it easy on them and in a swift flash of mane and tail, I lope up the grade behind me and vanish into the wood.

I peer back at them from the darkness. A few of them are still staring, though I'm gone. I know what they're feeling; two weeks ago I was one of them. No more naked than hands and feet; imprisoned in their bank accounts and rooted like oak trees by mortgages and marriages...there's not one of them who wouldn't like to be like me, just for a hour. Really, honest-to-God-and-Goddess free. They don't seem to understand, to really understand, that all they have to do is take off their suits and walk away from them.

I know, because there was a time I didn't have a suit. And don't again.

What I do have is snares, set around the forest. I set off to check them.

She says to me, "There's a good restaurant on Woodside Avenue. It's called Charlie's. Lori said the food there is fantastic for the money."

I say, "Lori's apt to confuse 'cheap' with 'good'."

She sighs. "If you don't want to go, just say so."

"You're right, I'm sorry," I tell her. I want to stand behind her and put my paws on her shoulders and kiss her, and not long ago, I would have. But now the idea seems forced and awkward. A lot like sex has been lately.

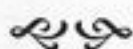
We're falling out of love. We're poking at the embers of a fire, trying to get air to them, when there's nothing left to burn. "Do you want to go?" she asks me. "Really?"

"Yeah, come on. Let's get out and have some fun. What's the place called?"

"Charlie's," she says. She smiles a little. Her face is soft and her mane is long and full and it's easy to remember what attracted me to her. But I'm having a hard time now remembering why I stayed so long. I'm trying to find that in her face but I just don't see it. Is she thinking the same thing about me? When she looks at me, does she see someone interesting she loves, or just a strange collection of spots, stripes and blazes on an all-too-familiar muddy-brown face; brick-red eyes that no longer seem like bottomless voyages into my soul, but glazed and cloudy water, impenetrable, forbidding?

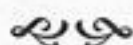
I don't know what's changed, but something has.

We've been living out of her dorm, and out of mine. Half my stuff is in her dorm, half her stuff is in mine. Right now, we're in mine. I get to my feet and put on my jacket and we step out into the hall and I lock the door.



The snares are places no hiker or carefree kid is likely to stick a foot. You get to know where these places are. Nature's arranged it so that these are also the places small game is most likely to move—probably because there's no one like us walking there. It's really just a matter of time.

It's taken me an hour to check my traps. There are six of them. No luck today. I stand at the edge of a soccer field, swampy with last night's rain and empty of churning feet, with nothing to eat but the meager sunlight filtering through the broth-thin overcast.



Woodside Avenue is aptly named. Where she and I are seated, I can look right out into the forest; the dark, smothering, naked, all-forgiving mother. I realize I'm filled with a longing I'd forgotten.

She taps my hand. "Sorry, I didn't realize you wanted to be alone," she says acidly.

I'm too fucking tired of this shit to be stung or sincerely apologetic. "Sorry," I say. Flat as the table top. "Neither did I, but I guess I do," I want to say, but I don't.

We've ordered, but the food isn't here yet, so there's no way to fill the silence.

"Are you seeing someone else?" she says.

This is an unfair question. We both see other people from time to time; there's nothing exclusive about our arrangement—or at least, not that I'm aware of. We're simply each other's principal significant other. Maybe that's what she's actually asking me; is this still the case?

"Not really," I tell her. "I mean, I'm not in love with anyone."

Her eyebrows climb higher into the soft fur of her brow. I catch myself, and quickly add, "...Else."

The drinks arrive. This gives me something to do with my mouth while I set up the next move. While she's taking a sip, I ask, "Are you?"

She blinks, and her eyes flutter up to meet mine. She pulls her mouth off her drink to reply. It catches in her mouth for a moment, and she manages, "No. Not really..."

There's a nuance to her response that not everyone would pick up on. Am I sensitive to this kind of thing because I once lived in the wild, where reading someone could make the difference between keeping your skin and waking up dead in the morning? In any case, it's plain to me that if she doesn't have another *primus inter pares*, she at least has a candidate in mind. Is that what tonight is about? Is she fishing to find out if she's free?

Am I?

I feel suddenly, deeply sad. There's no desperation about it; it's not like I'm losing something and I'll do anything to keep it. It's just that the loss has come. I know there's no going back, and even though I think we both want and need to push ahead, I can't help being wearied and depressed. It's like the pain as a tooth wears itself out of your head to be replaced by another. It's

unpleasant, but you have to go through it, or it festers.

Under the table I smooth my foot over hers. This is a gesture that led to our first night together, some time ago. I wonder for a moment if she'll catch the significance. She doesn't withdraw, at least. She closes her lips and swallows. It makes her look glum.

Out the window are the trees, and the bank of the wide river that runs like a line of tears through the fur of the cheek of the world, channeled down these twin mountain ranges that define the state. At the crest of the hill on the opposite shore is a whole other state. For the moment, I find that a profound realization. It's all I can do to keep from pushing the fabrics off my body and clothing it instead in that river and the green freedom on the far shore...



I wake up. It's nearer to noon now. I was asleep again. As a civic you tend to think of sleep as something you do in one solid block, usually at night. You get back into the bush and it's what you do whenever you're not doing something else. It's the thick black glue that holds the jagged technicolor events of your life together, like stones in a tar-patched country road.

I've been awakened by the sound of kids in the soccer field. I sit up and look at them through the trees; they have no idea I'm there. High school kids, about the age I was when I became

one of them; a clothes-wearing civilized clock-watcher. Everyone wears the same blue shorts, but half the kids wear yellow-and-white-striped

jerseys, and half, red-and-white. They're mixed, both in terms of sexes and races. Lanky lagomorphs, stocky ursines, fleet canines and felines...Some, like me, are blends you can't immediately pin down. People are increasingly like that as time goes on. Look at me: I am the future. An ethnic mutt. Whether the future will be sitting naked in the forest or dressed in synthetics and kicking a soccer ball around a manicured pitch is harder to say.

I scratch my ear—a long, rather rabbit

ear bequeathed me by some bunny ancestor—and realize I've been having that snake dream again. Swallowing the apple, whole. I wonder if I'm trying to tell myself something, or if it's merely a pleasant image that I've seen or imagined at some point.



She's sucking my cock.

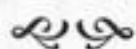
This is good-bye.

My eyes are shut and my mouth is open; my jeans are pooled at my ankles like blue candle wax. We're in a park, just out of sight of the road, and it's good. Really good. It hasn't been this good in a long time. I think it's because she can afford to make it good because it's over. Her spit is running down my balls as I lean back on some



boulder the town paid a couple of thousand dollars to have shipped here, to a land full of nothing but boulders, and moaning, I baste the back of her throat with my jism.

Even at this point, I'm not prepared to say this will never happen again; it probably will. But next time, it will be between friends, not lovers.



My fist pumps smoothly up and down my cock as I sit in the soft, moist earth, indulging myself; my mind full of that evening. It matters not at all to me that there is a field of potential spectators just the other side of the trees; it might have bothered me a few weeks ago, but I'm not caught up in all the false modesty anymore; no, right now, what I'm caught up in is the memory of that night. I haven't had sex with another person since; and now as I lean forward to tongue my neglected maleness, bathe it in my own sweat and indulge it in my own mouth, my mind fills with the scents and sensations of that final civilized evening.



Clyde awakens to me sucking his cock.

This is good-bye. But he doesn't know it just yet. In the darkness of his dorm his pale blue eyes open; the white head rises from the pillow and smiles, the big masculine ears pointing to me. "Hey, Scout, buddy, nice to see you," he whispers. "Always a pleasure," he chuckles.

Someone is sleeping beside him on the far side of the bed; I'm not sure whom. Smells like a girl; and what's more, his cock tastes like pussy. No one I've ever tasted before, but it's nice to get the flavour, if only vicariously. Procyon, at a guess. Clyde's been exploring new opportunities this evening, that's clear.

I lift my head from his lap, stroking his spit-wet cock in my hand. I come right out with it, so this will all have some meaning. "I'm leaving, Clyde," I whisper.

"Leaving?" he asks, pumping his hips slowly in time to my fondling.

"I'm leaving. Everything. School. The city. This life. I'm heading back to the forest, pal."

"Fauve?" he asks me.

I nod, and press my mouth down over his meat again. He draws in a breath, but then, reluctantly, reaches down to lift my chin out of his crotch. He wants to talk more than he wants to cum. "For how long?"

"I don't know. Maybe forever."

He strokes my face. "What for? Don't go, Scout. You're my best friend. Y'all are the best thing goin' on around Salmon Hat."

"I'll miss you two, mouse. Real bad. But this place is getting under my skin and I gotta get out."

We stare at one another in silence while I massage his prick. "I'll look after your things," he tells me. "Till you get back."

"You can keep it. The stuff, my bank account... it's all yours, Clyde."

"Stay here tonight. We'll talk about it in the morning."

I smile, giving his cockhead a loving lick. "What about your company?"

We look at her and she's propped up on one elbow, watching us, dark green eyes sparkling in the moonlight, dazzling in that raccoon mask of hers. She walks her fingers across Clyde's chest and deadpans, "Friend of yours, Clyde?"

"Sherry Softpaw, Scout McIntyger. Scout, Sherry," Clyde says.

"Nice to meet you," she purrs.

"Scout here is my best friend. Tells me he's heading back to the woods. Maybe for good."

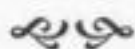
"Oh," she says. "Are you a fauve?"

"I was," I say. "Going to be again." All the while I'm stroking Clyde's cock.

Clyde says, "I was wondering if you'd mind if he stayed the night."

"I don't think I'd mind at all," she says, licking Clyde's round ear.

The night turns into something of a going-away party for me. Though we didn't know each other, Sherry makes it plain she's going to be sorry to see me go. As part of the celebration I'd taken off my clothes and wallet. I never put them back on. I'm gone long before the dawn; long before they wake up.



It's funny, but I miss my toothbrush. When you eat meat, the gunk doesn't build up on your teeth much. But when meat's scarce and you're living off roots and berries, yeah, all the sugars really encourage it. Filmy. Never bothered me when I was a boy but now I know better.

Ditto toilet paper, but let's not go there.

These are the things that usually don't occur to people when they get all romantic about the life of a fauve. They think it's just pretty much running around naked and screwing. And it is, partly. Would I be out here if it were all bad? But you're also hungry a lot of the time, you often don't have shelter, there are parasites (sometimes bugs, sometimes other fauves), and if it gets cold enough, you can die. Well, if you're stupid and don't know how to live in the wild, like most civics.



It's before the flood; before Judith and clothes and my return to civilization. It's when I still had Dennis. He's sick; he still hasn't healed from the gunshot wound to his shoulder the previous autumn. This was my fault; for screwing around with a civic girl who had a maniac for a boyfriend. I tore his throat out when he came for me, but not before he shot Dennis.

It's all my fault. He's slowly dying. Very slowly. It might take years, but he'll never really recover from this and eventually it'll kill him. That's how it looks to me. He won't let me take him into a town where they might be able to help him. Years later I'll assuage my guilt telling myself this; he stayed sick much longer than he had to, and that's why, when the flood came next spring...

But it hasn't come yet.



I'm crouched at the edge of the forest on a grey spring afternoon, my eyes on the garbage cans outside a restaurant at the border of a little steel town. The air is full of sulfur and the trees are twisted and evil; there's no magic in the place. The iron saps it, and there's steel everywhere. This is no place for living beings.

But the food smells like heaven. Good, nourishing food. I'm trying to work up the nerve to go raiding. When there's no one left in the back alleys along the forest, I sneak out and vault the wooden fence along the property line. No one sees me as I lift the lids on the can, picking through, looking for something I can bring back to Dennis.

The steel door at the back of the restaurant bangs open and I freeze. A chubby rodentish man emerges, just lighting a cigarette. The door shuts itself behind him with another loud bang. This guy is nicely dressed and even I sense the air of authority about him; he's either the owner or at least the manager. Then he catches sight of me, a naked young man digging in his garbage cans; he only pauses for a moment before he sizes me up, shaking the match out as his eyes narrow. "Hungry, are you?" he says.

"Yes, sir," I tell him.

He glances around, taking a drag on his cigarette. "Lots of good things to eat here. Do you have any money?" He's teasing me; he knows I don't. I mean, where would I carry it? Up my ass?

I shake my head.

"Well," he says, waving the cigarette around expansively, "...there are other ways to pay for a meal around here, if you're interested. You can sing for your supper..." For some reason, he laughs at this.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask him.

He sticks the cigarette in one corner of his mouth and talks out of the other; he needs both hands for what he's doing. "Well, I'm betting you can't sing anything my customers would want to hear...you probably wouldn't stick around long enough to wash any dishes; you'd be gone the minute my back was turned...but there's one thing I know you forest fuckers are good for..." As he says this, he's unbuckling his belt, unbuttoning his pants, unzipping his fly...He drops out of his pants, and I watch him become rigid right before my eyes. He drops the cigarette to the ground; stubs it out with a well-calloused smoker's toe. "Well?" he prompts. "You hungry or not? I ain't got all fucken afternoon; get on with it, kid."

In kneel in the cold rain puddles at his feet and take him into my mouth; I have no problem with this. Sex and food really are the only currencies a fauve understands, and I'm willing to pay the price. He stands above me, worming his fingers into my mane, making the most of it, bucking his sex in my face. I can see now why he wants this so much: I can't taste or smell anyone else on him at all. This is probably the first sex he's had

with another person in weeks, months...maybe longer. I try to make it good, figuring he'll be more generous if I am. In any case, it doesn't take him long; he's holding my ears, pulling them, hurting me, and I hear him shudder, "Don't miss a drop...take it all..." Just after that he floods my throat, emptying himself into my guts. Okay, mission accomplished.

After panting for a moment he pulls his nuts off my chin and his cock out of my mouth; he tucks them all away back under his fat belly and does his pants up. I wipe my mouth on my arm and get to my feet. I say, "Have you got anything I can carry away? I'd like to take it home."

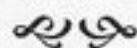
"What are you talking about?" he smirks. "I just fed you."

He bellows with laughter. The fat fuck! I've been going down on him just so he could pull some tired joke on me. Get his rocks off. Cheat me. Starve Dennis. I want to kill him. With my teeth, my hands, my feet. But he's big. He has the people in the restaurant. He has the law.

And he knows it.

He opens the steel door. "Help yourself to the garbage if you're still hungry." He slams it. It locks.

And I do help myself to his garbage. Lots of it. I'm going to need a lot of food for what I have I mind to do tonight...



Judith. It's funny; I miss her, even now. She represented everything that was wrong with civic life. She was rich, and that was what mattered. I thought she loved me, but I was a pet, a toy. I didn't mind being lent to her friends, or dressing up in a chauffeur's outfit to drive her around, or even studding the adopted fauves of some of her rich friends. It was all an adventure. I knew I was being used, but I was still young enough not to care.

I grew out of it. I started to care.

I started wondering, when am I going to stop being her driver? I was her principal bedmate—although by no means the only one—and I

wondered when I was going to get this education she kept promising me. When she was going to better me, raise me up to her equal, marry me. I wasn't a boy anymore; I was a man.

Judith was rich. Old money. Her family had been in government in the Midlands long before it was part of the Freelands; you've heard of the Broadfields, of course. Pure vulpine. What was I? A talking animal, an absolute mutt racially, half-drowned, whom she snuck—kidnapped, essentially—out from under the noses of the Home Guard at the site of a great disaster; a flash flood that smothered a thousand fauves, including Dennis.

She was all I had in the world. The only one who seemed to care at all. For years, that was all that mattered to me.

She and her friends all had "pet" fauves, like me; it was in vogue. It wasn't quite slavery, but something just short of it. I remember her breeding me to a girl, part lapine, part scurridine, part lupine, who "belonged" to a friend of hers; the CEO of an aircraft company. It was in his living room. The girl had been induced to estrous; she was kneeling on the thick glass coffee table in the middle of the room. They brought me to her. Judith and her friends stood around us, dressed in their finest evening wear as though it were an occasion, sipping drinks, while I climbed onto the girl and serviced her. It was supposed to be "in celebration of the spring equinox" It was a bullshit excuse to have an orgy, actually. We were all stoned on something; within half an hour they were as naked as we were. The only caveat was that no one was to actually fuck the girl but me. I woke up with her in some corner of the apartment full of plants. I guess the both of us were retreating to the forest together, in a way. We cuddled and she told me her name as Alice. Then I made love to her. And there is a difference.

I never saw her again.

One morning after Judith got home from sleeping with this fellow, Alice's... "benefactor", I overheard her on the phone to another friend, talking about a little boy who looked like me, only he was grey instead of brown.

I never went to see him, or even heard his name. I should have. I should have grabbed him and Alice and headed for the hills.

But I still wanted Judith.

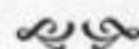
Alice wasn't the only one who got pregnant. One morning after running errands I found a report dumped in the wastepaper basket in her office. It was a medical report. It outlined how she was carrying a child. Male. Half vulpine, meaning her; half "racial stock of indeterminate nature". Meaning me.

Aborted that same day.

Five years of realizations washed over me in the space of a couple of hours. She had murdered the child we had made, however accidentally we might have made him...The child of the man she had promised to educate, raise up, make her partner. Wed.

I took the page, placed it on her desk on top of my chauffeur's uniform, and left.

Two days later, I was in a rented car, driving across Columbiana to Salmon Hat University.



It's a busy afternoon; I spend my time weaving a length of rope. I reckon the distance I'll need, and then double it, just to be sure. Takes me about four hours, but at the end of it, I've got a nice, sturdy rope. I tie it to a trunk and test my weight against it, hard. When I'm satisfied, I nap.

It's late when I wake up. By now Dennis is probably a little worried, but he knows how these things can go. After all, he taught me. You don't really worry until the second day. After all, towns and cities afford fauves a lot of opportunities they don't ordinarily get. And this is definitely one of those times.

There's no moon because of the overcast; it's still cool enough to see my breath, lit alive by the naked lights of the street and its buildings. While I'm sitting here, I'm eating berries. Ones I wouldn't ordinarily eat. They're mildly poisonous, you see. But that's important. I eat just enough of them to get my guts gurgling, and then I lay off them. I wait. It's hard to guess when midnight

comes, but after a while, when cars pass down the street on which the restaurant fronts only every few minutes or so, I decide the time is right. Or rather, my guts start telling me it's now or never...

Civics tend to think of themselves as smart. Smarter than people like me, living like animals in the woods, anyway. They forget fauves are people, just like them, with brains in their heads, just like them. What's more, we don't use them just to get ahead like civics do. We use them to survive.

Now I've noticed, in my travels with Dennis, that places like this almost always lock their doors and windows. They often have alarms, too; in fact, window glass vibrates when it carries an alarm wire. Most civics don't have hearing good enough to pick that up, but most of us do. I peer around his windows, looking in. I can hear the whine of the alarm wire. I nod; good, that just makes it interesting. I've got my rope coiled around my shoulder; I uncoil it now and tie a lasso. I start tossing it onto his roof. It takes me about ten minutes to hook it onto something firm, but eventually I do, and I scale the side of the building onto the roof. There I find just what I'm looking for; his skylight. This is the one place that's going to be unsecured, if anything is. Sure enough, there's no alarm wire. The fucking thing's not even locked, so I don't even have to crack a pane to get in. I just claw it open, toss the rope down, and lower myself into fatso's kitchen.

A place like this is too cheap to have motion detectors I wouldn't be able to see. At best, it would have those cheap-ass ones with the little red lights that blink on and off. But this guy is trusting in his humming windows and locks alone. Great. I won't have to rush. Time to play.

I look around the place. It's a pub. I help myself to bottle of beer from the fridge as I look around, guts gurgling again like an angry stew. Yes, how appropriate. The guy's got a board where he's already chalked up tomorrow's special. Reading is an important skill for fauves who live anywhere near towns, so most of us pick up at least a little. Dennis and I are better versed than most, so I have no trouble figuring out what the sign says. Curried beef over chips, \$8.95.

Oh, mama. I shut my eyes and smile.

Back to the kitchen with my beer. In the big fridge at the back of the kitchen I find the huge cauldron with tomorrow's special in it. Oh yeah, it's gonna be special, alright. I take the lid off and set it on the floor and do what I've been dying, almost literally, to do for most of an hour. I squat over the lip of the cauldron and I shit in it. No, I explode in it. Everything I picked out of his garbage this afternoon makes a triumphant homecoming, along with the foul, angry berries I've been eating—which, around noontime tomorrow, will be doing to his dear patrons just exactly what they're doing to me right now. Not to mention the wad he shot down my throat, which I'm now sharing with all the curry lovers. Since I didn't get paid, I think it's only fair I return it.

Ten or fifteen minutes pass before the cramps abate and I can stand up. My asshole's as ragged as a five-hour fuck, but all I can do is smile. I find a big ladle and I stir the curry around. It smells glorious, but this is one feast I won't be sampling. I wash the spoon off and put it back, and carefully replace tomorrow's lunch in the fridge. Wish I could be around for the fireworks and the health inspector, but it's enough to know it's coming.

Time for a little personal revenge.

Between the pub room and the kitchen I find an office. Smells like him and his sweat; this is probably where he beats off or molests the help. I sit in his patched leather chair and start poking around the drawers of his desk. In the second drawer on the right I find a raft of porno magazines (he seems to have a fetish for striped chicks), an unloaded revolver, and a bottle of rye and a bottle of mouthwash, both nearly empty. I pick up the bottles and try to decide...which one? Oh, the rye of course...He'll be swallowing that, not merely spitting it out. So, I sit there in his chair, work myself up, and shoot my load into his rye. I shake it up really well, mixing myself evenly, invisibly through his booze, and put the bottles back in his drawer. Suck on that, asshole.

Now it's time to get going. I dig around and find a basket in the basement. The freezers are also down there. By carefully rearranging things and being modest about the amounts I take of any given item, I hide the evidence of my pilfering. I stock the basket with cuts of meat, a few quarts of frozen soups, stews, and even a few bottles of what I presume to be expensive wines. Back in

the kitchen, I tie the basket to the rope. I have no way to lock the door from outside, and I'm not about to risk tipping him off after all my hard work, so I climb the rope back up to the roof. I haul the basket up, and then lower it to the ground. I climb back down and untie the basket.

I coil up the rope, swing

it around, and toss it up onto the roof, where it's still hooked. It'll be weeks before the wind and rain wash it down, if ever. In any case, he'll never discover my visit before his customers do.

I make my way back to the burrow where Dennis is waiting, and we feast, for days.

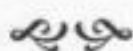
Not quite a week later I sneak back, very, very early in the morning. There's no recent smell of cooking about the place, and as I dare to show my naked

body on the empty sidewalk, I see the sign in the window that says *Closed pending review—Bluecoat County Dept. of Health*.

The name of the bar, I notice, is Jimmy's. I can't help but wag my tail broadly; my second name is James. We could have been pals.

There's not much in the garbage cans around back; the health department probably took most of it as evidence. Just the things Jimmy's thrown out since he was shut down.

Among them, an empty rye bottle.



I'm lying back at the edge of the soccer pitch, in the warm rain. The kids have all gone home. I'm trying to work up the will to go check my traps again. For some reason, I'm thinking of my mother.



My mother died when I was five. I was nearly twenty before I found out she was still alive, and, in fact, I was the one who was dead.

I don't remember exactly what I was after; I was searching Worldnet Alpha in Judith's study. She'd faked a birth certificate and a whole history for me under my real name. There was another guy, too. I mean, what are the odds of there being two guys named Scout James Arthur Teal McIntyger on the planet at any one time? But there we were. Me, the living one; him, the dead one. Dead just before his sixth birthday, in

a forest fire. Declared legally dead by his mother and father, Trudy and James McIntyger, three years later, on his ninth birthday.

Though I was a grown man when I read it, I cried. She'd been alive all those years, but thought I was dead. And vice-versa.

I remember that fire. We got separated in the confusion. Friends looked after me after that. Dennis and his aunt mostly. Otter folk. The reason we'd been living out in the wilds in the first place was that my parents had a contracting business and had gotten in trouble with the mob a year or two after I was born. My folks split up, my mother taking me to hide in the woods while my dad tried to straighten it all out. I guess he managed to, somehow, because

after I "died", my parents got back together and got on with their lives.

I have three sisters and two brothers. Their names are Heather, Dusk, Richard, Elizabeth, and Patrick. I even know their phone number, and the pang hits me every day to phone them.

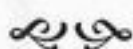
But what does a dead son say after nearly twenty years? What can you possibly say that would make their lives better? What would they think of the life you've lead? Your brothers, your sisters; would they welcome a stranger? And even to your parents, what are you but that now?

A stranger.

I'll never call. Better to leave them with a dead son who is a sweet memory than replace it with what I've become.

The one thing I did do, after leaving Judith, was set the record straight. My noseprint matched the "dead" kid's birth certificate, so they had no choice. Maybe someday, one of the McIntygers will be idly picking through names on World-net Alpha. Maybe one day, someone will phone me...

But there are no phones here. I get up, and I go and check my traps.



I was born on a train. That wasn't the plan, but apparently nobody thought to check with me.

My mother is on the way to meet my father on a spur line in western Guildwood. They're going to have me in a cabin. My mother thinks this is romantic; of course, she's never given birth before so she can still indulge such ideas. She's nearly there; in less than an hour she'll be in the station. Which is a good thing, because—uh oh—she's been in labour since just after she boarded six hours ago.

Less than an hour. Her water breaks. She ain't gonna make it.

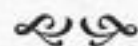
There is no one else in the car but a scout; a boy on his way to meet up with his troop to go hiking. His good deed for the day will be to help bring a life into the world; that's all.

I'm a mercifully quick delivery. I'm in the arms of this child; he is the first person in the world to hold me. It is his scout knife, hardly ever opened before, that cuts the cord. He's watched too much television; he amuses my mother by pronouncing, "Ten fingers, eight toes, and a little taggle. A healthy baby boy."

The kid is covered in blood and amniotic fluid, but to my mother, he is the vision of an angel. She remembers everything about him; the blond hair, the round, blue-grey-furred feline face with its tabby markings; the ice blue eyes that sparkle like melting spring. Everything about him except one thing...

When the train stops, the conductors carry my mother off; my father sees me for the first time. The kid is waving to her, smiling, as the train pulls him away. My father hears the story and suggests naming me after the boy. My mother agrees; she's been thinking the same thing. My father asks what the child's name is. A look of horror splashes in my mother's face, and she bursts into tears. She has forgotten to ask.

My parents name me "Scout".



There's a rabbit in the fourth snare; she'd dead. Here am I, stroking this soft dead thing, that I meant to kill, that I will eat; and still, full of sorrow. I hope she died quickly.

I think of Alice, her long ears, her teeth on my shoulder. The way she held me, stroking me, my pelt soft as rabbit, but alive.

They sang to us. Gathered around with their brandy, while I had my body inside hers. While we were making our son—or attempting to, at any rate—they sang to us. A hymn. Something my mother had sung to me when I was little; I remembered the melody, from that little burrow that was home and school and church to me. But that night, drunken, stinking of lust, they serenaded our communion:

*God of holy ages past
Of justice, might, indemnity;
Goddess, mother, breath of life
Of wisdom, hope, solemnity:
Grant your children, one and all*

*The image of your love divine,
And leave an image of ourselves
To keep the place we leave behind.*

I skin my catch, gently, reverently. Her pelt is the first of those I'll collect for bedding for the winter, for the burrow I finally build. Her flesh will purchase me one more day on this planet.

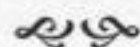
There must be others, I'm thinking. Sons, daughters, I mean. Alice's boy is the only one I'm really sure of. But there was Peggy—the girl whose boyfriend shot Dennis—I knew she was in...“that way”...when we did it. She didn't know, but I did; my nose told me. Chances are, she got pregnant. How many others? Being a fauve, there are opportunities; you don't miss them. Life's short, and coupling is just too pleasant.

I build a fire, careful to keep it clear of anything else; this forest is home, and I've been in forest fires and lost too much, far, far too much, to be careless. I cook the rabbit; the scent of her tortures me both with hunger and guilt. The animal and the angel at war in a man. As ever.

I wonder. How old was I the first time I had sex? That's a difficult question to answer. For civics, there's usually a definite transition. A day you can point to. An event. With fauves, it's more a matter of degrees. Blurry distinctions between levels of cuddling. Life for us is very sensual to begin with. There are cold nights where mingled bodies are survival. Warm nights where the simple physical hunger for contact—just to be touched—must be obeyed. I don't know for sure when, or with whom, it became The Act. It was all just part of cuddling up. Oh, I'm sure there was a first time it was deliberate instead of merely incidental, but even that occasion is lost in the haze of the people with whom I was intimate to one extent or another. In the wild, you rarely know someone for long before you turn to one another, if you're going to be friends at all. You share food, you share shelter, you share bodies. That's how you survive. It's only in the cities that people somehow have managed to convince themselves these are separate things. Things that can be mixed and matched and given or denied with different levels of importance on different days and in different places. It's amazing I ever learned all those rules. Even more amazing I agreed to live by them.

But how many times have I made my mother a grandmother? I guess I'll never know. Obviously, neither will she.

The doe's flesh is delicious as I convert it into my own. Ravenously, gratefully. This too is a form of communion.



Dennis stands on the log, his limbs clean, his body lean and glistening. Arms outstretched, eyes closed, he prepares for the dive like a priest prepares a sacrament. This is not surprising, because Dennis is a mustild; an otter, and water is his element.

I am already in the water, splashing around, waiting for him to join me. My entry into the water was clumsy and perfunctory; I am nothing in particular and have no spirits to offend. There are other boys around us; a few girls as well. The weather is hot but the water is cool; besides, the fleas don't like it.

“Come on, Den!” I splash him. The claws of his toes arch out and bite into the wood; he will not be rushed.

We are both still very young. He has most of a decade left to live. My mother is still alive; or rather, still with me. “He's worried his dick's gonna shrivel up,” an older boy yells. There are hoots and laughter; Dennis opens one eye and frowns. He shuts it and dives.

It's magnificent. He barely ripples the water, cutting in. I feel him grab my ankles and haul me under; I suck in a breath, quickly. Under the surface, in that eerie green otherworld, we both see each other; we float, weightless, like ancient skylanders might; grappling and smiling, holding the sky in our lungs. He releases me, and swims past me, his body rubbing over mine like oilcloth, and we head for the light; Dennis like a cormorant, stabbing at the fish-like sun; Scout like a chubby puppy, gamboling after its master. We break the surface and laugh. I'm a mess of tangled fur. Dennis is sleek and glistening; he looks like a god, and even at this age, I'm jealous. Children applaud; the skill of his dive means something here. A few leap in to join us.

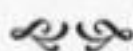
The sun is going down. Someone says, "Do you smell something?"

We all invade the sky with our snouts. "It smells like fire," a girl quavers. And she's right. And not a campfire. A big one. There's a glow in the sky, off to the south, nowhere near the sunset, where no glow has any business being.

"We'd better go home," someone says. Dennis takes me by the hand, and calmly but firmly, pulls me from the water.

I will see some of them again, but not all of them.

Not all of them.



I put the rabbit's bones in the fire, and let it eat the rest of her. Presently I throw earth on it to smother it. This is her funeral pyre. This is her grave.

The moon would be up by now, but it's overcast. I find a dry hollow between some trees and settle in. I've eaten; there's nothing to do. I lie back and think. Thought becomes sleep becomes dream.



Judith calls me James. Sometimes Jamey. Sometimes even Jimmy, in bed. She's never liked the name Scout. I vaguely resent this, but given that my father's name was James, I learn to live with it.

"Mmm, Jimmy," she says. It sounds like she wants to ask me something, so I lift my head up from her pussy and say, "Yeah?"

She writhes a bit; the room is done in pale mauve shades; even though there's still plenty of sunlight, she has the lights on. It's like she doesn't want to miss anything. She smiles, her chin wedged between her tits, and picking at my hair, she says, "How'd you like to be my driver?"

"Don't you have a driver?"

Her smile fades a little. She's like that. She doesn't like being corrected or second-guessed. At this

point, I'm still fauve enough, still independent enough, to not really care. She takes a breath, letting it pass, and says, "Well, Thatchmanor's getting old. He probably shouldn't be driving. He can look after the cars, and you can drive me around. Oh, think of it. Think how—keep licking, honey—think how smart you'll look in a uniform. Think how everyone will envy my young, sharp driver. Think of all the things we can do, when we're out on the road..." She purrs, tossing her mane, giving a thrilled little yelp as I set her off. "Oh, you little bastard," she chuckles, "where'd you learn that?"

I'm too busy to talk.

"But anyway—ooooo...Anyway, I was thinking we could start training you now, and...when's your birthday?"

I barely lift my head. "October 18th," I tell her. One of the benefits of having a civic mother.

"And on your birthday, we'll get you tested, get you your license...all just formalities; besides, even if you don't do well, I've got friends. You'll pass."

I shrug. Right now, I'm just some displaced boy living with a rich woman. I have no other plans, no other real options. This kind vixen is my world, for now. So I will be her chauffeur, it seems.

There's a knock on the bedroom door; it isn't really closed. It's Eddington, the butler. He stands just outside.

"Yes?" Judith says.

"Please excuse the intrusion, Miss Broadfield, but I..."

Judith rolls her eyes, interrupting. "What is it, Eddington?"

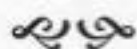
Eddington steps into the room. Judith is not particularly bothered to be seen in bed with a lover; Eddington is not noticeably bothered to bear witness. God knows, he's probably been there himself on occasion. "Phone call from Mr. Roarbitter, Miss, on the business line. I tried to explain, but he insists it's quite urgent."

Judith clicks her tongue; she curses. "Goddess." She lifts her leg over my head and rolls out of bed. Eddington steps back out of her way as, naked, tail bobbing, she pads out into the hall. "Probably wants to list feed bags again," she says, cryptically.

"No doubt, Miss," Eddington agrees. He glances back at me, lying tail-up on Judith's bed. A lean, attractive, older ferret of supreme reserve, he manages to convey just the slightest, carefully-released amount of contempt toward me, clearly wondering why Judith would sully herself with an unkempt, unpedigreed monstrosity like me. He smiles frostily, and says, "I do hope you'll enjoy your new...position...young Sir."

I roll onto my hip, and finger myself, smiling at him. "I've enjoyed every position she's put me in so far," I say, softly.

He sneers, and shuts the door.



Somebody's poking me with a stick. In the nostril. I wake up instantly and swat it away.

Two little kids are giggling. They jump back, shrieking. "Toldja he wasn't dead," one of them babbles.

It's bright and sunny this morning. The two of them are dressed in light windbreakers and flannel pants. They're both lapines; from the smell, brother and sister. The boy is white with black spots; little girl is grey-brown and looks not unlike an anthropomorphic version of last night's supper.

They've backed away a few yards, giggling into their hands, watching me. The buck, who's younger, points someplace rude. "Hey, mister," he laughs, "don't you know you're naked?"

"I'm a fauve," I snarl.

"He's wild," the little doe stage-whispers.

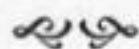
"That's right. Do you know what I had for dinner last night?"

They shake their heads.

"I had a rabbit. Maybe that's what I should have for breakfast!"

The two of them screech and turn tail, vanishing down a path.

I poke at my nose, making sure I'm not bleeding. "Stupid little assholes," I growl after them.



I'm settling into my dorm at Salmon Hat. I've only been there a couple of days. I don't have much yet but the clothes I brought with me. I'm sitting on my bed, reading, trying to pick courses, when there's a knock at my door.

I look up, pull a face, and get up off my bed. I cross over and open the door. "Yeah?"

There's this guy standing there. Suit and sunglasses. Too old to be a student. Too stiff-looking to be a professor. He says, "Scout McIntyger?"

"Yeah."

He holds up an envelope. "I have a message for you. Sign here, please."

I scribble my name on his clipboard. "Um... how did you find me?"

"Have a nice evening, sir." He turns and walks down the stairwell.

I stand there kind of dumbfounded, long after he's gone. Then I shut the door.

I stick a claw into the corner of the envelope and pull. It's a note from Judith.

I'm scared. She still has tremendous power to hurt me with a word. Is she going to dismiss me or beg me to come home? It's a minute before I'm ready to read it. I sit in the bay window of my room. The dying sunlight of the evening seems appropriate.

Jimmy,

I understand why you're upset. I guess I would be too. It's hard to know what to say to you. I never wanted you to know. I never wanted you to be hurt.

I guess I always sounded like one day I'd settle down, with you, and start a family. Maybe some days even I believed it. It's hard to say this without hurting you, so I'll just say it. I do plan to marry, one day. But I have to be honest with myself. It will be a man like me, born to money, with a background. Two-point-five perfect kids. Someone who will be comfortable walking the halls of Congress, or at least a help in me getting there. I'll cheat on him, and he'll cheat on me, and we'll make the rounds like we always have. That's how it is for people like me. I have ambitions, Jimmy, and as much as I love you, you just aren't the one I need to get me there.

But let me tell you who you are. You're the man I love, Jimmy. Deeply. And I always will. The man I eventually marry, whoever he is, I will never love the way I love you. You were exciting and you kept me young a lot longer than I had a right to be. Don't think it was easy for me to give up the little boy we made together. I cried for him, Jimmy, for hours. I will always mourn him. But he meant giving up everything I hope to achieve, and I just couldn't face that. You'll never know all the mornings lying beside you when I imagined begging you to take me out to the forest and put all this behind us. But I'm not like you. I need this. I need luxury and comfort and power. In a way, you're freer than I am. You were right to walk away. I'm sorry I didn't have the guts to tell you all this a year ago.

Call me, Jim. You know the number. Reverse the charges. Just talk to me. Don't let it end without a word. Maybe you don't want to talk today, but I'll always take your call, darling. Whenever you're ready, I swear. And maybe one day, we can even see one another again. When I grow up a little.

No matter what, Jimmy...Scout...never doubt in yourself. Life can be cruel, and I guess so can I, but the shortcoming was in me, not you. You're a fine young man. Go and find someone who loves you as much as I do, but who deserves you, and make her happy. And don't ever be afraid to ask for help. The way you helped me.

I will always love you.

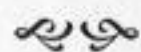
Judith.

I lie there wishing I had a lighter so I could burn the thing. Instead, I rip it in half and toss it on

the floor. It winds up in a plastic bag I'm using as an ersatz garbage can. Later on, the two halves wind up in my desk drawer.

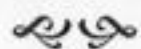
During my second year, I tape them back together.

But I have yet to call her.



I check the snares again, knowing it's too soon for there to be anything, and I'm right. There's nothing. It occurs to me, rather later than it should have, that perhaps there are too many people around here for the hunting to be very good. With little kids like the two shoving the stick up my nose this morning stomping around, what else should I expect? It's a wonder I caught the rabbit.

I decide to range a little deeper into the forest. I'll be back to check the traps later; I mean you never know, right? But in the meantime, I need to see what's out there.



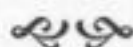
Her name's Vickie. She's hard to get into bed. Maybe that's the attraction. She warms up when she finds out I used to be a fauve. It's not a surprise, because a lot of women react like that. You become mysterious and erotic. Maybe a little tragic. In any case, they want to know what it's like. But Vickie doesn't crumble all at once. It takes me time. It's sweeter when it finally happens. It's a warm night, and we're strolling through the park together, hand in hand. She gets this look on her face, asking me if it was places like this where I used to rendezvous with other fauves. In short order we're in the bushes, she's on her knees, I'm in her mouth. When I cum, I cum hard. Shit, it's good.

I meet her parents over the holidays. Vickie and I make out on the bed she used to sleep in. She tells me I'm the first she's ever had there whom she didn't have to sneak in. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her how many beds I've been snuck into, both as a fauve and a civic, but I decide against it.

A month later she and Clyde and Lisa and I go on vacation to the Happenstance Islands.

Three months later she's blowing me in the bushes again, but this time we're saying good-bye.

She's not the one Judith wished for me in her letter.



I come to the ford of a shallow stream. I stop. There's a broad field beyond it. A forest. The mountains. They're inviting. There's a gravity to them that will only become more irresistible the closer I get to them. And I suddenly get the feeling if I cross, I'm gone.

I sit down on the bank of the stream and put my feet in. I stare at the mountains and think about how hard it will be; what I'm leaving behind. But I think about what could be waiting for me out there. Love? Fortune? My unburied, bleached bones?



I sit down on the bank of the pond and put my feet in. My jeans are the type that end just under the knee, "forders" by name, so this is not a problem. When you wear clothes, you have to worry about washing clothes.

I'm in the forest off a path a couple of miles from the university. Judith's letter is still ringing in my head. I need the forest to embrace me. This is why I've come here. I am a child of the moon; pallid beyond pale and deathly beyond death, she floats in the afternoon sky. I pray to her for guidance. Her hurting, confused son, who has turned his back on her for the comforts of a bed and

central heating and the false god of television, sits on the verge of tears with his feet in a pool of all the tears she has ever shed, and prays.

There are towering, marvelous oaks here; they almost seem tall enough to trap her in their grasping crowns. But of course, no tree can hope to catch the minted icon of the Goddess Herself. But I imagine if I climb them, high into their limbs, I can beg her, face to face. Catch her tears as she catches mine.

When it occurs to me to pray to her to look after the little boy Judith sent her too soon, I weep. And for a moment, just a terrible moment, it crosses my mind to go chasing after him, the only way I can...



There's a rustle of bushes, and I curse, softly. Someone is coming. A voice is talking. I realize it's someone muttering to himself. "Goddamn if that isn't a fine looking pond. I think I just might have found me—oh! Howdy there," he says, catching sight of me. Pallid beyond pale, he's a talk, husky mouse. Or squirrel, maybe, judging by the tail. No, a big white mouse with a squirrellish tail. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he asks.

I shrug, hoping my face doesn't betray my feelings. "No," I say. "It's...it's just a pond. You have as much right as me."

"Yeah, but you were here first," he smiles. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

There's something relaxing about his presence. His voice is southern. He's gregarious; I can already read that much. "I don't mind," I tell him, honestly.

"I'm obliged to you," he tells me, and he pads over to me. He's wearing red shorts and a yellow t-shirt; he drops down beside me and sticks his feet into the water. He reaches his paw out to me. "Clyde McNutter," he says.

I shake his hand. "Scout McIntyger."

"That's a different name alright," he smiles. "That your real name?"

"Sure is."

He shakes his head. "Not much chance of me forgettin' that one."

"Good," I say.

"My first week here," he says. "Maybe you can tell me where the good spots are."

"Sorry, Clyde. My first week here too."

He shoots me a dubious look. "No offense. You look a couple years older than me."

"Twenty-two," I say.

"Twenty," he says.

"I'm a late starter," I say, dryly.

"Me too," he says. "Spent a couple years as chief cook and bottle washer savin' up to come here. My Daddy wanted me to join the army like him..." He shakes his head. "No fucken way do I see myself marching down that path. Pardon my French," he smiles.

"No problem," I say. "I mean, no fucken problem."

Clyde laughs; he slaps me on the back. "So what's your story, pard?"

I take a long breath and mull over my answer. The pangs of my bleeding heart radiate across my soul. Feeling far older than I look, I say, "Well, something like yours. I've just spent six years as

a chauffeur, and I finally realized if I was going to make anything of myself, I had to do it myself."

"Amen, brother. What you gonna study?"

"I dunno yet."

He chuckles. "Wow, I guess you and me're gonna find it all out together, eh? Make it up as we go along."

"Yeah, I guess so."

He lifts his foot half out of the water and looks at his toes, glistening in the late summer sun. He says, "Damn fine pond. Reminds me of the ones back home."

"Where's that?" I hear myself ask.

"Carolingia," he says. "Down in the Midlands. Like y'all couldn't guess," he chuckles. "What about you?"

"Well, I've been living in Industria, but I'm originally from Guildwood."

"Glad to be back in Truenorth?"

I shrug. "The Freelands is pretty much the Freelands to me."

"I guess you're right," he says. "Like this pond; like I was saying, same as the ones back home I used to go swimmin' in. In fact, to tell you the truth, that's kind of what I had in mind when I came lookin' out here."

"Yeah?"

"Sure," he says. "You wouldn't mind if I took advantage, would you? I reckon it's gonna be pretty damn cold here pretty damn soon."

"No, I don't mind."

"Thanks," he says, pulling his feet out and standing up. He pulls his shirt over his head. He says, "Care to join me?"

I scratch my ear. I say, "Yeah, sure, I don't see why not. It's nice and warm." I stand up, pulling my own shirt off. He's pulling his shorts off; I push my jeans down. Naked, the two of us step

down into the pond, wade in a bit, and then push forward into the warm embrace of the water.

"Oh, just perfect," he says, and he's right. It is.

We paddle around for a while talking and joking, and end up sunning on the bank as the sun goes down. I'm happy to have found a friend so quickly, and I figure he is too. Finally he gives me this cool, coy look and says, "I don't know about you, but I'm thinking about scopin' the action around here tonight. I really need some attention, if you know what I mean."

I smile. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

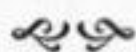
Clyde corrects me: "Amen, brother."

"Sorry. Amen, brother."

"What do you say we get dressed and follow our dicks to the campus pub and see what kind of action we can flush out?" Clyde says.

"Sounds like a plan," I say, and so he gets to his feet. He holds out a hand to me and helps me up. We brush each other off and dress, and climb back up to the footpath.

We continue to talk over a few beers while we, as Clyde put it, scope out the action. Clyde and I turn out to be the action. We wind up back at his dorm. Aside from opening the door for pizza deliveries, we spend the weekend in his bed. Everything changes for me, and in spite of myself, I start to feel happy again.



The snake flicks its tongue at the apple. His jaw dislocates, and he slides himself over its succulence like a sleeve over a fist. The snake engulfs the apple, and he's happy.

I lift my head from my chest and shake off the sudden sleep. I'm sitting with my feet in the stream, looking at the mountains. Huge breasts with their snowy nipples. I want to go drink from them.

Why not? The world is free. It's mine for the taking, much of it. The only thing between me and them is time, effort. Possibly a fence or two, but we'll see.

There's the soft lick of the pine needles as I caress the world with my trotting feet. Even walking is an act of lovemaking if you only listen to the whisper of the world against your pads. Hot asphalt and smooth concrete clothe the world of the civic, though, and hide the body of the first and last lover we ever know...Not me. I feel her body below me with every step. Her breasts loom, misted and moist before me.

It's a little before noon the next day when I spot the mark. It's been so long, but how could I forget that? Dennis and I left one like it any number of times ourselves. It excites something nearly lost in me. The mark of a dreamlatch, unmistakably carved into a tree. I pause and regard the mountains, but it's been so long now. Yeah, I want this. I follow the signs to the patch in the glade. I begin to gather the leaves even before I find the dreamlatch. There's a protocol to be followed, even in the anarchy of the wild.

The dreamlatch is in the hollow of an oak tree; the little box carved by some ancient knife, wielded, no doubt, by a hand long dead, but remembered in every celebration. I deposit the leaves I've gathered to dry, and take some of those gathered by others before me and crumble them to replace what I'm about to take. In the box is a clay pipe, carved in the form of a nonmorphic otter, lying on his back with a bowl clutched to his chest where a clam ought to be. It startles me; I blurt, "Dennis..." It's a coincidence...isn't it? But a sharp one to glide my paw along, feeling it cut in almost without pain and bleed me without a drop shed. I gaze upon it a while, then turn back to the contents of the box. Matches. That sure beats flints or a turning bow. Someone has a civic friend, no doubt sworn to secrecy. I finger some of the leaves into the bowl and strike a match. Draw the smoke into my mouth. Breathe. Hold. Release.

Cough. It's been a while.

I pause and wait. The place is saturated with the scents of those who came before me, probably as recently as the previous week. The leaves, fire, meat, fucking. Even the scent of birth, though it's more ancient and rain-worn. The things this place has seen...And I stand here alone, with the icon of a dead friend in my hand, smoke curling from its heart like a surrendered soul...

I moan as it settles on me, like a dawn in reverse, but not a sunset. The sun coming down to morning.

I'm on my back. I haven't fallen, but I don't remember lying down. I simply am. Last summer I stood on the shores of the Eastern Sea, letting it swallow my feet, lick away the sand from beneath them. I can hear the roar of its tides in my ears, because it and my breathing have become one and the same over a distance of two thousand miles. I never really left that place, in some strange way.

Above me is the sun, ablaze in the trees. One eye—the other rules the night. Always they gaze down upon a fauve, and he's never alone. A cloud passes between me and it, not a cloud at all. An answered prayer.

She looks like my mother. Your mother. Everyone's mother. But of course, She is. She hovers over me, smiling down with the radiance of the sun all about Her, nude but for the deepening span of jeweled gold that girdles Her throat and hangs down between those perfect breasts. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Of course, I am immediately, rigidly erect. I don't bother to hide it or even fight it; what would be the point? She knew before I did.

"I didn't think You still made house calls," I say.

She takes my cheek in Her paw and smiles "I am the house."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be flippant..."

She slips Her paw away from my face. "It's alright," She says, "We're just being casual." Her mane billows in the air, though there's hardly a breath of wind to support it. "We speak in myriad ways, child. This is how you choose to hear Me. So be it."

"Is this real?"

"Of course not."

"So You're not really here?"

"Of course I am." She can't help laughing. "Come on," She says. "You know the difference.

Presence, object, direction... these are real things."

"Why You? Why not God, I mean. Can I ask?"

"I'm divinity's compassionate side. The feminine side. It's what you wanted."

I nod.

"God and Goddess," She says, gazing around. "God's not what you're after, is He? Not right now. You want answers, understanding, not awe and scary lights."

"Nothing makes sense anymore. I don't want this. But I don't want that either."

"You weren't meant to be contented. None of you are. You yearn. Even in joy. Don't fight it, don't question it; it's what you're good at. It's what you're made for."

"Me?"

"Every one of you." She smiles again, and it's like a gentle rain finally breaking over a parched desert.

"Dennis..."

"Is someone else now. He's still who he was. She, actually. Fundamentally. Just not superficially."

"Someone else? Where?"

She shakes Her head, slowly. "Never you mind. You'll see him again ages hence. It will be as though seconds passed. And every tear of sorrow will branch into rivers of joy to wash you both."

"Why not now?"

"So impatient. You've existed for countless ages. Do you imagine this is the first time you've felt loss? Do you know how much love has warmed you through nights unnumbered?"

"I miss him."

"Sorrow is part of the story too, Scout. A soul is a narrow reed that resonates to so many notes. A

great symphony needs it minor chords; they're what make the major chords joyous. And this," She looks around, arching Her arm with perfect grace, "is the greatest symphony there is."

There's a sudden spark of anger in me, indignation. "And the baby?"

"Judith's?"

"*Mine.*"

"What about him?"

"What was the point of that? Why bring him into existence and then let him die...murdered...before his first breath?"

"There is no point."

I gape. My heart sinks.

She says, "Other than the one, which is experience."

"What could he possibly have learned?"

"Who said it was for him to learn? It changed you. It changed her."

I consider this. "And him? Our son?"

She sighs. "You play poker?"

"Not very well."

"No, you're awful. You'd think a fauve would be a better bluffer, but there's something about the circumstances... well, that's beside the point. Have you ever been dealt a bad hand? I mean, one so terrible you fold right away?"

"Sure..."

"But there's another hand right afterwards, isn't there?"

I close my eyes. "Do you mean... do you mean he was born somewhere else? He's alive, somewhere else?"

"Somewhere else, someone else, somewhen else." She touches my forehead. There is a flash. Laughter. The antiseptic scent of a schoolroom.

Strange alphabet; speech I don't understand. Not even a blink's worth. Just enough to realize.

I gasp. I open my eyes; they're full of tears. "Was that real?"

"Does it please you?"

"Yes."

"Then believe it. Right now, that's all you can do." She leans over me. The perfect breasts of every mother press, pendulous and full, against my face. She cradles me. I nuzzle.

"I just... I don't understand. I want to be happy, but I can't find the way. It's like I don't belong. Anywhere."

"Be happy. You have a right. You have the means." She licks my face, bathing me.

"I don't know how."

"What span of angels would it take to bridge the gap, Scout?"

"I don't und—"

"There's no miracle to it. What makes you happy?"

Her breasts are warm; they give, perfectly, as I nuzzle them; press to my face and melt my soul like chocolate from something cold, hard, and brittle, into something warm, rich, and fragrant. "My friends..."

"Then return to them. What else? What else makes you happy when you think of it?"

It's a sudden realization; a bright butterfly newly burst from a somber old cocoon. "My family..."

"Then go to them."

"I'm afraid to."

"Why?"

"They wouldn't want me... They might not..."

"The mother who has cried for you in her heart every day for nigh twenty years; you think she would find you lacking? The father who pictures the little bones of his firstborn son nestled in the ferns; you believe he would have it so? The siblings who have never laid eyes on their lost brother; you imagine they would turn them away on sight of you?"

I blink away tears.

"Go to them," She whispers. "You don't need an excuse. You deserve to be with them. And Scout..." She says, holding me, "they deserve you, too. Remember that."

"I love You," I whisper.

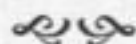
"I know, Scout. And I love you. As always."

She leans forward, and engulfs me. The warm, perfect, original mouth. It is ecstasy incarnate. Of course, all an outside observer would see is a scruffy fauve, pawing, licking, mouthing himself. But I see deeper. I know what it really is. What it always is.

The snake swallowing the apple. They're one and the same. Being feeding on the experience of itself. Over and over and over. Forever.

Later on, I cry. I don't know how long. Maybe minutes, maybe days. For Dennis and Judith, for the little boy I lost and the family that lost me, and for everyone who ever held me or smiled at me, gave me a place to sleep or morsel of food. Or ever would. The feeling is still there, long after the dream has faded. Communion lingers.

When the strength is in my limbs I rise, I turn. The mountains hold no allure for me now. How could they? They send breezes to tease my ankles and chase me home.



Clyde opens the door and flicks on the light, stretching and yawning. He opens his eyes to see me lying on his bed.

"I want my stuff back," I smile.

He grins at me, and shutting the door, he turns off the light. I hear his clothes drop to the floor as he crosses to the bed. In a few moments, the inky blackness is filled with the pantings and moanings of Clyde giving me my stuff back.





Publishing a magazine is almost always a challenge. (I say almost because I'm sure that someone somewhere out there has put together a magazine without any troubles whatsoever; I don't know this person, but if I did, we would no longer be on speaking terms.) There are so many things to keep track of, both big and small, that it's a surprise these things manage to come together with as much regularity and success as they do. You plan ahead, and you make your deadlines; you give yourself what you think should be a reasonable amount of breathing room—and you're still madly rushing around at the very end to get everything in. Only after you've gotten your proof from the printer and OK-ed final production do you get to completely relax.

The fact that you have this copy of the magazine in your hands (or paws or talons or whatever) means that somehow we managed to pull everything together. We are quite pleased with this issue, and we hope that you are too. That way we can justify all the time and effort and mental anguish that goes along with its production.

HEAT

Managing Editor—Alopex

Associate Editors—Jeff Eddy, Tim Susman

Our Family of Farm Products: © 2005 by Kyell Gold, illustrations © 2005 by Jonas

Shark: © 2005 by Leo Magna

Spiced Foxes: © 2004 by Sheela Ardrian, illustrations © 2005 by Lurid

Danang Heat: © 2004 by Patrick Rochefort, illustrations © 2005 by AlumaSquirrel

W. Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII
illustration © 2005 by Leo Magna

Lapping the Competition: © 2005 by Adam Wan

Missing: © 2001, 2005 by Scout McIntyger
illustrations © 2005 by Eric "Bayson" Hunter

If you read this magazine from front to back—as you should—you will probably have already realized that the short stories in this issue present some challenges to the reader too. Kyell Gold's "Our Family of Farm Products" challenges the reader to consider what going through puberty in a very isolated area must be like, especially if the only person to share your feelings with is your brother. Bahumat's "Danang Heat" is a story about the sensitive subject of non-consensual sex that leaves the true nature of the encounter a bit of a mystery until the very end. Scout McIntyger's "Missing", on the other hand, is a challenge in construction: the narrative consists of many short fragments of stories that seem to circle around, revisiting and reconnecting with each other until they come together in the final scenes. Fortunately, the poetry and comics that surround the stories provide relief from these challenges—which is not to say that they deserve any less attention!

We are tremendously pleased with all the content we've managed to pull together for this issue. Sure, there were some delays here and there and deadlines missed, but in the end I think we have a product everyone can be proud of. We hope that you find it has been well worth the wait.

As much as it would be nice to take a break, now that this issue is done, it's already time to start thinking about *Heat* #4...

Front & back cover illustrations © 2005 by Adam Wan
Afterglow illustration © 2005 by Eric "Bayson" Hunter

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Animal Magnetism

fierce little night flower
 glisten ing black
 your violent kiss es are
 velvet and fire
 with sizzle ing fur
 and a burn ing agony
 you convulse in my embrace
 like a cat on a leash
 together we bite
 take wild exquisite pleasure
 drunk on wave s of
 passion and musk
 soak ed in sweat
 dirty and raw
 we tremble with lust
 until the animal fever
 explode s
 like an
 orgasm of lava

